

Hitting the cartels where it hurts

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Legalization of marijuana would end drug profiteering and violence

By Gov. Gary Johnson

(Former New Mexico Gov. Gary Johnson is a Republican candidate for president)

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Imagine you are a drug lord in Mexico, making unfathomable profits sending your illegal product to the United States. What is the headline you fear the most? "U.S. to build bigger fence"? "U.S. to send troops to the border"? "U.S. to deploy tanks in El Paso"? No. None of those would give you much pause. They would simply raise the level of difficulty and perhaps cause you to escalate the violence that already has turned the border region into a war zone. But would they stop you or ultimately hurt your bottom line? Probably not.

But what if that drug lord opened his newspaper and read this: "U.S. to legalize and regulate marijuana"? That would ruin his day, and ruin it in a way that could not be fixed with more and bigger guns, higher prices or more murder.

As a Republican presidential candidate, especially one who served as governor of a border state, I hear a lot from people - all across the country - about the crisis along our border with Mexico. People are often surprised when they hear me say that the "border problem" is generally misconstrued and widely blamed on the wrong things.

Make no mistake. There is a war going on along our southern border. An estimated 28,000 people have lost their lives to border violence over the past six years, and there is no end in sight. It is, without question, a more serious threat to U.S. interests than anything we are facing in Iraq, Afghanistan or Libya.

But having lived most of my life in New Mexico, done business there for decades and served two terms as governor, I will say with great confidence

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that just about everything we are doing to deal with "border issues" is wrong.

First, inflamed by politicians who have chosen to use illegal immigration as the ultimate wedge issue, far too many people see a connection between a lack of so-called border security and border violence. Let us be clear: The border war is not an immigration problem - illegal or otherwise - and even if it were, fences and troops would not solve it. If anything, the crackdown measures of recent years, while doing little or nothing to address illegal immigration, have had the unintended consequence of upping the ante for the cartels trying to move drugs across that same border, resulting in greater crime and violence.

Immigration is a different issue - and one that must be addressed not with fences, but with a system for legal entry and temporary work visas that works. Real border security is knowing who is coming here and why.

Border violence, on the other hand, is a prohibition problem. Just as we did for Al Capone and his murderous colleagues 90 years ago, our drug laws have created the battlefield on which tens of thousands are dying. By doggedly hanging onto marijuana laws that make criminals out of our children while our leaders proudly consume wine at state dinners, we have created an illegal marketplace with such mind-boggling profits that no enforcement measures will ever overcome the motivation, resources and determination of the cartels.

There are ample reasons why millions of Americans, the Global Commission on Drug Policy and, just recently, former Mexican President Vicente Fox are calling for legalization of marijuana as an alternative to the failed and ridiculously costly "war on drugs." Twenty-eight thousand deaths along the border are certainly among those reasons.

Will legalizing marijuana put the criminal cartels out of business? No. But it will immediately deny them their largest profit center and dramatically reduce not only the role of the United States in their business plans, but also the motivation for waging war along our southern border.

Our federal government has spent 40 years and a trillion dollars on a failed war on drugs. The real and societal costs of treating drug abuse as a crime problem rather than what it is - a health problem - are inestimable. Add to that reality the tragedy our laws are fueling along the border, and it clearly is time to end this prohibition, just as we ended the last one.

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