Obama: Just say no

by Debra_J_Saunders

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It seems pretty obvious that the last three presidents â€” Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama â€” once smoked marijuana. OK, Clinton claimed he didn't inhale. Bush refused to say whether he ever used drugs; instead, he coyly alluded to mistakes in his youth. Obama didn't play games in his memoir, "Dreams from My Father" â€” he wrote about using marijuana and cocaine as a kid.

The big question: If all three men nonetheless managed to become president, why can't Washington decriminalize marijuana?

Or better yet, legalize, regulate and tax it. At what the White House billed last week as an "experimental" town hall meeting with questions submitted online, the most popular questions were about marijuana. President Obama chose not to answer any such question directly. Instead, the president volunteered that "there was one question that was voted on that ranked fairly high, and that was whether legalizing marijuana would improve the economy and job creation." Then he quipped to laughter, "And I don't know what this says about the online audience."

His answer to his question: "No, I don't think that is a good strategy to grow our economy." Fair enough, legalizing marijuana isn't a strategy to improve the economy. But there are reasons to legalize marijuana, such as the 872,720 marijuana arrests made in America in 2007 â€” more than 775,000 were for possession, not sale or manufacture. Those individuals who are convicted may have criminal records and may have trouble obtaining financial aid for college â€” even if some day they could grow up to be president.

And what can America show for its drug laws? The World Health Organization found that 42.4 percent of Americans had tried marijuana â€” the highest ratio of any of 17 countries surveyed. WHO researchers concluded that drug use "does not appear to be related to drug policy, as countries with more stringent policies (e.g., the United States) did not have lower levels of illegal drug use than countries with more liberal policies (e.g. the Netherlands)."

In short, drug laws don't work, but they cost the federal government alone some $3.7 billion annually, according to Harvard economist Jeffrey A. Miron.

Ess Eff's Bruce Mirken of the Marijuana Policy Project observed, "I can't say that I'm completely surprised

by the way Obama dealt with it, but I wonder if he was smart to insult the online audience that played a very large role in electing him."

Insult? I don't think Obama meant to insult anyone. I think that was a well-executed political straddle â€” Obama winked at the pro-legalization crowd, even as he ran from the policy it so craves.

Mirken told me, "I can't help but feel that (Obama) really knows better, but just doesn't think he can go there politically now." That's the sign of a successful straddle: when the people whom you officially oppose believe you secretly sympathize with them.

In February, pollster Scott Rasmussen reported that 40 percent of Americans support legalizing marijuana, 46 percent oppose, while 14 percent are not sure. Voters under 40 are more supportive of legalizing marijuana than older folk.

With such findings, you might expect that 4 in 10 Washington politicians support legalizing marijuana. But only a minority of politicians dares support something as modest as the Hinchey-Rohrabacher amendment to stop federal raids on medical marijuana clinics. In 2007, the House defeated the measure by a 262-165 vote in its fifth incarnation. In 2008, however, Hinchey-Rohrabacher never even made it to a House vote.

Too toxic for a presidential election year. Mirken and I agree on this: Any change in America's marijuana laws will percolate from the bottom up. Said Mirken: "This is one of those issues that when it changes, it's going to be all of a sudden, like the fall of the Soviet empire. I think we're getting close to that point, and I think that politicians will be the last to see it coming."

Or maybe the change will never come. Maybe Americans want politicians who back expensive, ineffective marijuana laws â€” even if the politicians ignored those laws when they were young.

Maybe some voters are willing to support laws that they believe will turn someone else's kids into criminals if it means that their kids will be less likely to stray â€” even if tough laws don't really dampen drug usage. Maybe anyone can grow up to be president â€” whether he inhaled or not â€” just as long as he campaigns on the promise to just say no.

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