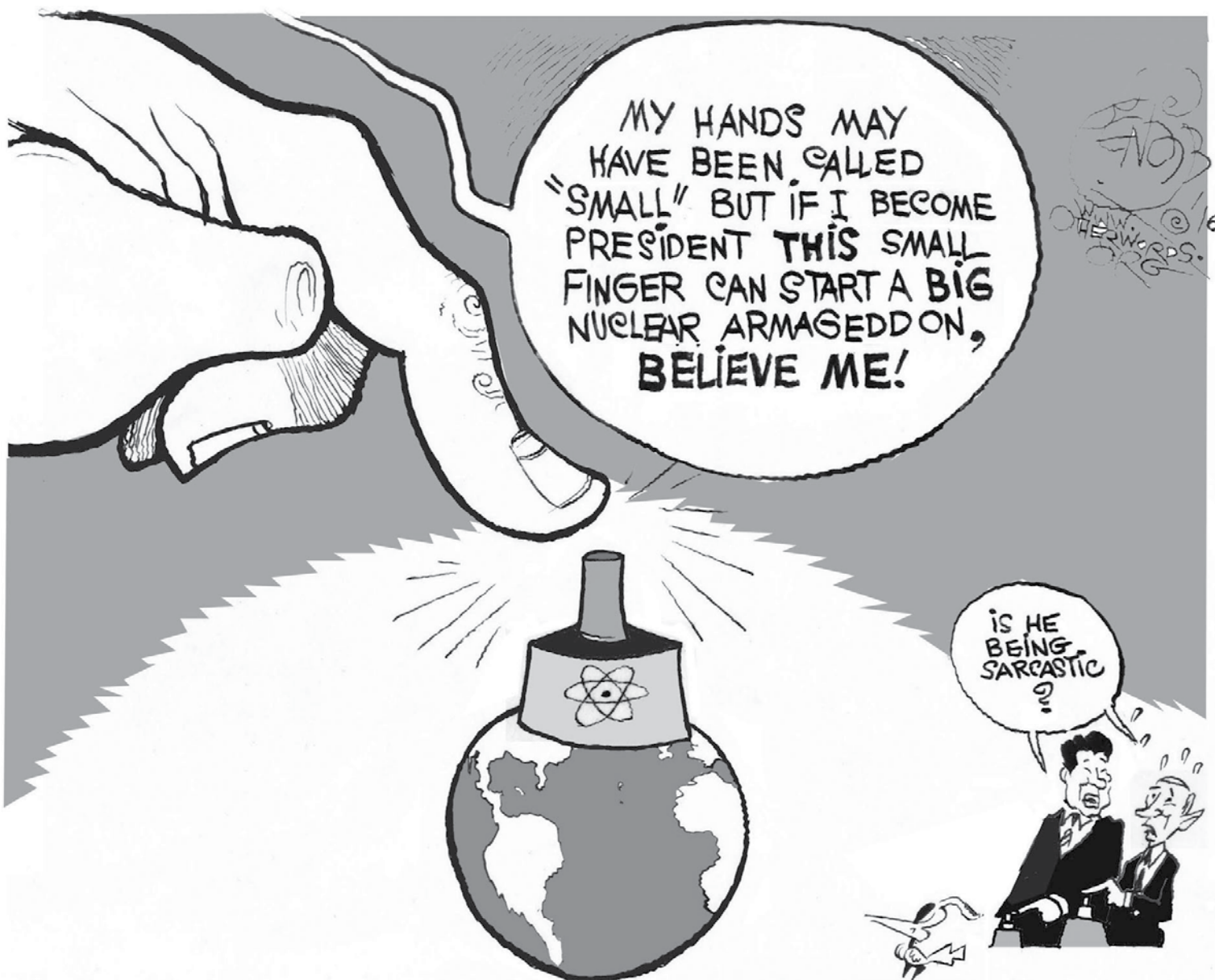


OPINION



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Federal Marijuana Laws Reek of Hypocrisy

Keeping pot on same list as heroin

BY JILL RICHARDSON



For a few brief months, it looked like America might take a step closer to sanity. And then came the news: the Obama administration will not loosen federal restrictions on marijuana after all.

Before delving into the issue of marijuana, consider its two fellow “gateway drugs:” alcohol and tobacco. Aside from the potential benefits from drinking a glass of red wine, neither one is good for you.

Alcohol can be incredibly harmful, either via acute alcohol poisoning or via chronic destruction to your life and liver. Cigarettes are always bad for you.

All three—alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana—supposedly entice users to take a timid step into the world of drug use and then find themselves plunged all the way in with “harder” drugs like heroin, cocaine, or meth.

And while illegal drugs like meth and heroin can ruin your life or kill you, so can legal ones like alcohol. Just ask any recovering alcoholic.

But among the three so-called gateway drugs, marijuana alone is illegal according to the federal government.

Marijuana is classified as a Schedule I drug, defined as having no medical use and being subject to abuse. It’s more regulated than cocaine, which hospitals have on hand for medical use.

But half of all U.S. states disagree and have enacted laws to legalize medical marijuana at the state level.

So recently, two governors asked the feds to take another look at its classification. The Obama administration and the DEA had a chance to ask themselves—should marijuana really be on the same list as heroin, as it is now?

Yes, they decided, it should.

They’ve agreed to expand the availability for “legitimate researchers” to conduct clinical trials to determine whether marijuana has any legitimate medical

uses, but they currently say there’s no credible evidence that it does.

The hypocrisy is unbelievable, on two levels.

First, because alcohol and tobacco are allowed, even though people can abuse them, and even when they provide no medical benefit.

Second, because we use an entirely different standard to determine the safety and legality of any number of other chemicals.

In most cases, our laws treat chemicals as safe until proven dangerous. Marijuana, on the other hand, is being held to a higher standard. It’s not even that it’s considered dangerous until proven safe. The government says that they won’t lift regulations on it until it’s proven beneficial.

In the last 40 years, the EPA banned just five out of over 80,000 chemicals used in the U.S. So while asbestos was still legal, even after scientists knew how toxic it was, people were locked up in jail for smoking pot.

To be fair, Congress just passed a reform of toxic chemical regulations this year. But the new law only goes so far. The EPA is currently working its way down a

list of 90 high-priority chemicals that are both toxic and legal, including asbestos and arsenic.

Why do we have one standard for thousands of chemicals—considered safe until proven otherwise—and another for marijuana?

Imagine a world in which asbestos had to be proven safe before it could be sold legally. How many horrible deaths from mesothelioma would’ve been prevented?

Meanwhile, what if marijuana, which has caused zero deaths by overdose, was considered safe until proven otherwise?

We could regulate it just like we do tobacco and alcohol. We could say no advertising its use, no driving or working while high, no selling marijuana to anyone under 21, and so on.

The decision to keep marijuana illegal on a federal level until it’s proven to be beneficial reeks of hypocrisy.

OtherWords columnist Jill Richardson is the author of Recipe for America: Why Our Food System Is Broken and What We Can Do to Fix It. OtherWords.org.