George Mason University
School of Public Policy
Doctoral Qualifying Examination, Part II (take-home exam paper)
May 19 – 23, 2011

This part of the exam must be delivered in single hard copy to Shannon Williams Hettler or Beth Eck in Arlington no later than 5:00 p.m. on May 23, 2011. You must also email a copy to Shannon at shettler@gmu.edu no later than 5:00 p.m. on May 23rd.

You have been assigned a tracking number by the Doctoral Office. Put the tracking number on every page of the paper you submit as your response to this examination. Do not put your name on the paper or on any envelope in which it is submitted.

It is recommended that you re-read the General Instructions for the Qualifying Examination before you begin work on Part II.

The subject of this exam is the legalization of marijuana.

Assignment

The Governor of Rhode Island has assigned you to prepare a memorandum advising him on whether or not to recommend to the state legislature a bill that would legalize marijuana use for those aged 21 and over. This bill would allow the state to regulate the production and distribution of marijuana, as well as apply an excise tax on marijuana. It would also allow local governments to choose whether and how to regulate and tax production and distribution.

Your memo should contain (1) a balanced discussion of the pros and cons of the current prohibition against marijuana, as well as the pros and cons of its potential legalization; (2) your advice (yes or no), backed up by solid analysis, on whether the bill should be introduced; and (3) a list of key issues in the debate that are likely to be especially controversial, as well as arguments to bolster your position. Inasmuch as the Governor has high regard for your analytic abilities, your advice is likely to have important public health and fiscal consequences.

Because some of the readings may overlap and possibly have contradictory conclusions, you need to substantiate your arguments by referring to the material that supports your position. Be sure to make explicit any assumptions you make in writing your analysis.

Background

Public policy has failed to prevent large-scale consumption of marijuana in most developed countries. In the US, for example, marijuana is by far the most frequently used illicit drug, with nearly 6.6% of the population aged 12 or older (i.e., 16.7 million people) reporting marijuana use in the past month, compared to 0.6%, 0.5%, 0.2%, and 0.08% for cocaine, hallucinogens, inhalants, and heroin, respectively.

TURN OVER→→→
Rhode Island currently has the highest rate of marijuana use in the US, with 10.9% of its residents aged 12 or older having used the drug in the past month, and 15.8% having used it in the past year. In California, where voters narrowly defeated a similar bill last year, only 6.7% and 11.5% of its residents aged 12 or older used marijuana in the past month and past year, respectively.

The widespread use of marijuana in the US has created a substantial demand for marijuana products that is met by criminal entrepreneurs who distribute large quantities of marijuana in the absence of any quality controls or restrictions on sales to minors. Moreover, because marijuana is illegal, no tax is collected by the US government on the sale of marijuana products, and the marijuana industry is run by, and for, criminals who derive substantial profit from it. Marijuana prohibition makes marijuana a much more valuable commodity than it would be if it were sold at a price that covered the costs of its production and distribution and provided growers and distributors a reasonable profit. The large profits generated by the marijuana black-market ensure that the criminals who control it and want to corrupt law enforcement officials have the funds to do so. Because marijuana is easily grown indoors, it is very difficult for the police to prevent its cultivation. Ironically, the use of helicopters and satellite technology to detect outdoor cultivation may have had a counterproductive effect by encouraging indoor cultivation of small numbers of more potent forms of the marijuana plant.

Report Guidance

Prepare your memo in a form that facilitates effective communication with the Governor. Organization and clarity are important. Make references to the source documents where necessary to strengthen your arguments. You should include reference to data and analyses, but do not be overly technical. Do not simply recite or quote the conclusions of the authors of the readings; provide your own critical analysis.

YOUR REPORT SHOULD BE 4000-5000 WORDS, APPROXIMATELY 16-20 TYPED PAGES, DOUBLE SPACED, NORMAL MARGINS & FONTS.

VERY IMPORTANT: At the beginning of your memo, include a short executive summary (2-3 paragraphs, one page or less) that presents your findings and conclusions in simple, declarative statements with a minimum of technical terms. Write this section as if it might be the only section read by the Governor.

Your report will be evaluated on its overall quality as a policy analysis document. Among the factors that will be considered are the cogency and completeness of your arguments, the organization and clarity of your presentation, and the quality of your writing.

YOUR “REPORT” IS DUE TO SHANNON WILLIAMS HETTLER OR BETH ECK BY 5:00 P.M. MONDAY, May 23, 2011. DO NOT BE LATE!