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ENLISTING NEW SOLDIERS IN THE WAR ON DRUGS

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RICHMOND, Va. - To downsize the profits in illegal drug trafficking and thus strike an economic blow against the drug cartel, President Clinton should declare a weeklong moratorium on casual drug purchase and use

The president recently expressed alarm that drug use among eighth-graders nationwide has increased 150 percent. Given that, this initiative should primarily focus on teenagers and college students.

Clinton should announce a voluntary moratorium for this fall in the spirit of his presidential summit on volunteerism in Philadelphia. The president designated the week before his summit as National Service Week, and this could serve as the model.

It would also be highly appropriate for President Clinton to enlist former first lady Nancy Reagan, the architect of the original "Just Say No" anti-drug program (and a participant in Philadelphia).

Clinton should secure her mentorship in galvanizing America's youth to honor a one-week abstinence from buying and using illegal drugs.

Parents, high-school principals, college presidents, congressional leaders, governors, corporate chief executives, church leaders and sports icons could be counted on for moral support. The week could culminate with a march on Washington.

History has established that strategically timed, well-planned and coordinated economic boycotts have had devastating impacts on targeted industries.

The drug trade, although illegal and inherently violent, is no different in many ways than any product-based, privately held industry. And therein lies its Achilles' heel.

Drug lords simply cannot operate without making a large profit.

Whether the drug cartel likes it or not, the law of supply and demand hangs around its neck like an albatross.

A one-week catastrophic drop in national demand for marijuana and cocaine would puncture a tangible hole in drug profits, possibly forcing the cartel to raise prices - with a concomitant loss in sales.

This would be the sole purpose of the moratorium - and if successful, it could be repeated several times a year.

If the majority of casual drug users could abstain from buying and taking drugs for just one week,

then America would be delivering a sobering message to the drug cartel.

Indeed, Nancy Reagan had it perfectly correct when she introduced her "Just Say No," but the goal of zero tolerance is not feasible.

Short-term economic warfare against the drug industry is realistic and attainable, however.

Every presidential administration since President Richard Nixon declared the "war on drugs" in 1971 has attempted everything constitutionally permissible and imaginable to check this pervasive problem, with little success.

This proposed moratorium would be a quantum leap in reducing drug demand as compared with most previous efforts.

Traditionally, Democratic presidential administrations have been weak on crime-related issues.

With respect to Clinton, many Americans would argue that his moral compass is broken on drug-control policy because of his personal hypocrisy on past drug usage. As a consequence, he may have abdicated his leadership authority to lead the nation in such a moratorium.

In a penetrating opinion article last year, John P. Walters, President George Bush's deputy drug czar, concluded that even Clinton could reduce drug use if he "provides the necessary leadership." By virtue of being president, Clinton has at least positional leadership authority.

The Pulitzer Prize-winning patriarch of leadership studies, James MacGregor Burns, coined the term "transforming leadership." Here the leader mobilizes and elevates his followers to a higher level of motivation and morality.

Such leadership ultimately becomes moral because the leader transforms into a moral agent for the people. With an incoherent and inconsistent anti-drug policy, Clinton appears to easily fail the "transforming leadership" test.

My proposed moratorium would present a quintessential leadership challenge for the president.

Given the astronomically high death toll and the health and crime costs that illegal drug trafficking has heaped on the nation, Clinton would do well to let somebody like Retired Gen. Colin Powell or Nancy Reagan fill part of the leadership void in economically shutting down the drug cartel.

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Caption: ILLUSTRATION GARY VISKUPIC / OP ART: WAR ON DRUGS