

Open Letter to President Barack Obama

The notorious comparison of alcohol and marijuana, and the most important aspect that is conspicuously absent

Jan/29/2014

Dear President Obama,

It is with great interest that I have read your recent interview with David Remnick of The New Yorker. This article has initiated a myriad of emails and messages from IOGT International members from the USA and around the world reacting to your statements on alcohol and marijuana. As a result, I feel compelled to write to you to address the following as a matter of urgency.

IOGT International was founded more than 160 years ago, in 1851 in Utica, New York in the USA. We are a global movement with more than 120 Member Organizations in more than 60 countries around the world. Through the work of all these members (the vast majority of them volunteers), we undertake prevention, treatment, rehabilitation and advocacy work to control and reduce the harms caused by alcohol and other drugs. It is no exaggeration to say that we are heart-driven experts in this field.

In The New Yorker article you state clearly that you "don't think [marijuana] is more dangerous than alcohol."

You follow that by saying using marijuana "is not something I encourage, and I've told my daughters I think it's a bad idea, a waste of time, [and] not very healthy."

As you surely anticipated, the media jumped on these statements, exploiting your puzzling and contradictory messages about the legalization of marijuana and the comparison to alcohol. Headlines, articles and news pieces were largely omitting your critical remarks and concerns about marijuana legalization. These statements are deeply troubling. Please allow us, Mr. President, to explain why, in three concise points:

- 1) I believe you agree with the basic assumption that what is good for your daughters Malia and Sasha is good for all other children, too. All children in the USA have the right to grow up drug free. From this fundamental and heart-driven assumption follows that all children have a right to grow up free from drugs and associated harm. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) calls that "the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development." (CRC, Art. 27.1)

With this in mind, I would have wished for a much clearer statement that could not be misused by the legalization advocates, as has happened in the wake of your interview in The New Yorker. The members of IOGT International and many people around the world would have wished for a clear and concise commitment to making sure that the best interest principle enshrined in the CRC is held high: "In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration." (CRC, Art. 3.1)

I'm sure this is what you do as a father, and when it comes to harmful substances in society, I encourage you to also do this as the President of the USA.

- 2) To address the issue of marijuana in the way you did, by using the notorious comparison to alcohol is indeed very dangerous. There are two reasons for this: firstly, marijuana is highly dangerous, especially for the brain, for the mental health and well-being of the user but also for the community around the user and for society at large; you ran for President twice carried by a strong grass-roots movement of active, engaged citizens. Marijuana is evidently a huge obstacle for active participation in society. And secondly, we live in an alcohol culture that glamorizes alcohol and perpetuates myths about its effects; people are not even aware of all the health hazards and risks associated with alcohol, nor are they aware of all the damage to society, economy, community, and the health system.

This adds up to a toxic mix of misinformation, perpetuated myths and the general assumption that it could be possible to regulate marijuana in the same way as alcohol. It is in this context that I think your quotes in The New Yorker are harmful because the fact is that the USA is failing in regulating alcohol and preventing alcohol harm. It is also failing in protecting children and young people from alcohol harm.

- 3) Alcohol is the socially most harmful drug. It is a toxic, teratogen and carcinogenic substance that causes tremendous harm to individuals, families, communities and society at large, because it's aggressively marketed, easily available and comparatively affordable. Alcohol is so harmful because we live in an intoxicating culture where it is available and affordable almost at any time, at any place and to anyone. Additionally it is aggressively being marketed to children and young people and other vulnerable groups.

Mr. President, it is this aspect that gets lost when comparing marijuana to alcohol: a society thrives when there are fewer drugs, not more. The most fundamental task of any government is to protect its citizens from harm, especially the most vulnerable ones. Thus, it should be your task to make sure there is less alcohol use in the USA, instead of blowing wind under the wings of the marijuana (and other drugs) legalization advocates. It is thanks to the international conventions on drugs and the CRC that marijuana is a lesser burden on society in terms of harm. Mr. President, this surely means we should **not** conduct experiments with human lives by legalizing more drugs. And we have to find ways to regulate alcohol more cost-effectively and with higher-impact measures because the current policies are failing.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) just released evidence that alcohol harm is directly responsible for about 88,000 deaths and 2.5 million years of potential life lost in the United States each year. This amounts to a staggering burden on the US economy of \$223.5 billion.

Alcohol harm in the USA poses a disproportionate burden on young Americans.

Mr. President, consider the youngest and most vulnerable ones: there are 7.5 million children under the age of 18 living with at least one alcohol addicted parent. In America fathers convicted of child abuse are 10 times more likely to be alcoholics.

The alcohol industry plays its unethical role, too. Just recently researchers of CAMY (the Centre of Alcohol Marketing and Youth) have found evidence that the alcohol industry is using advertising to directly target under-

2 (3)

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age viewers aged 18 to 20.

Alcohol is a major risk factor for Non-communicable diseases, including mental health problems and disorders. As was recently shown for college students, alcohol use exacerbates students' post-traumatic stress disorder and those students with post-traumatic stress disorder are likely to use more alcohol than their peers without the psychological condition. It creates a vicious circle really.

Mr. President, I congratulate you for your latest effort to tackle the epidemic of gender-based violence, including rape and sexual assault, on American university campuses. Anyone who spends some time at university and college campuses understands that this problem will not be solved without addressing alcohol.

We know that the costs of intimate partner violence in the USA exceed \$8.3 billion yearly. In more than 55% of the cases, the perpetrators had consumed alcohol.

Just looking at this snapshot, it is clear that the USA has an alcohol problem – an alcohol problem burdening the youngest and the most vulnerable; an alcohol problem putting tremendous pressures on the health care system; an alcohol problem undermining the economy; an alcohol problem threatening the future of so many women and girls, of entire families and communities.

Comparing alcohol and marijuana in the way you did and in the way it can be picked up by marijuana (and other drugs) legalization advocates for their purposes is dangerous because it fails to take into account the Human Rights, for instance those of our children, and it misses the most fundamental questions that the entire debate should be about.

Alcohol, together with tobacco, is among the largest causes of ill health in the world, while at the same time this is preventable with the right kind of policies. It is a mistake of gigantic dimensions to legalize one more drug, marijuana, which will lead to increase in use and damages at levels beyond control.

We think the issue of drug and alcohol policy will be a big part of your legacy as President, potentially undermining your goals of building a sustainable health care system, of putting the economy on track towards sustainability and of giving every young American a fair shot at the American dream.

Yours sincerely,



Sven-Olov Carlsson,
International President
IOGT International,
Stockholm, January 29, 2014

3 (3)

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