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Getting Serious

On the same day (Wednesday, March 5) that newspaper headlines went wild announcing that Hillary Clinton, aka the comeback kid, had defeated Barack Obama (Mr. Inspiration) in Ohio and Texas, a smaller story appeared. Like almost all non-election stories in recent months, this one was overshadowed by the media frenzy that has accompanied the primaries. In fact, however, unlike most of what passes as political discourse in this country, it raises a genuinely serious question that should be discussed by every American. Especially its putative leaders.

Four days after military forces from Columbia entered Ecuador and killed a leftist guerilla leader there, the president of Venezuela, Hugo Chávez, sent troops to the border his country shares with Columbia. He accused Columbia, which has been fighting an insurgent force known by the acronym FARC, of being the “Israel of Latin America.” He was, in other words, accusing Columbia of being no more than a proxy for American foreign policy. Columbia receives \$600 million a year in American aid, as well as the advice of American military advisors, in order to fight a leftist insurgency that is funded by illegal drug trafficking. To American eyes this unholy alliance, frequently termed “narco-terrorism,” is an enemy that must be vanquished by the force of arms. Perhaps inspired by the precedent set by our actions in invading Iraq, Columbia did not hesitate to violate Ecuador’s sovereignty.

The possibility of a war between these Latin American countries is bad enough, but the story gets worse. The Columbian government reported that its soldiers had found evidence on a

laptop computer that the FARC had been seeking the ingredients to make a radioactive dirty bomb. This report may, of course, prove to be false, but it is a stark reminder of the absolute failure, and of the disastrous consequences, of America's long-standing "war on drugs."

Like the Taliban in Afghanistan, which profits from the illegal export of opium, FARC supports itself through the illegal trafficking in cocaine. Vast amounts of the stuff are sent to drug-hungry Americans, and so the coffers of both groups are full. So full that one day they might even be able to purchase a radioactive weapon that could cause an enormous number of casualties.

This story should make crystal clear that Americans must re-think our long held strategy for combatting illegal drug use, and our reflexive reliance on military force to achieve the goal of national security. The best way to start thinking seriously about the "war on drugs" is simply to consider the possibility that they should be legalized. If the coca farmers of Columbia, Bolivia, and Peru, and the poppy growers of Afghanistan, could trade in a legal commodity, if their produce could be marketed and regulated, entire regions of the globe, which are now covered by the shadows of criminality, would be opened to daylight. As sad experience has now taught us, it is precisely in such shadows that terrorists flourish. Our security as a nation requires us to cut off their supply of funding and flush them out. The single best step towards doing so is to legalize drug use in America.

I fully understand that this proposal is debatable. Indeed, this is precisely the point. While it is arguable that legalizing drugs is a bad idea, the sad truth is that no is even talking about it. Certainly not Obama or Clinton. Theirs are campaigns which pit change against experience, inspiring rhetoric against nuts-and-bolts policy making, a man against a woman.

Theirs is a campaign that has become mind-numbingly repetitive, and so has no room left for the dangerous but urgent question, should drugs be legalized? So while these politicians give their stump speeches over and over and over again, and while the media, in its desperation to convince its readers that something important is actually going on, continually analyzes every nuance of their candidates' strategies, entire countries like Columbia and Afghanistan have become havens for narco-terrorists; for people who some day may be well equipped to inflict serious harm on the United States. The possibility of legalizing drugs should, at least, be seriously debated.

As Obama and Clinton continue to dominate the headlines, I am becoming increasingly pessimistic about the ability of conventional electoral politics to deal with serious issues seriously. With their rapidly diminishing attention spans, American voters are gradually becoming incapable of dealing with substantive arguments, and neither the candidates themselves nor the media that covers them are much help. This is fiddling while Rome burns. This is a tragedy in the making.