

Reefer Madness

Abbie Hoffman

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If there was anything unusual in Judge Douglas Ginsburg's rapid descent, it was probably the sight of White House conservatives scrambling to create a loophole in the national drug hysteria that would mitigate occasional marijuana use by a Supreme Court nominee. Never mind that President Reagan said last year that drug users are "as dangerous to our national security as any terrorist"; he tried dismissing Ginsburg's indiscretion as nothing more than "youthful fancy."

There was nothing surprising about Reagan's expedient reversal. For six years, the only consistent thing about our national drug policy has been its inconsistency. Harsher penalties, urine testing, hysteria, budget cuts and the simplistic "Just Say No!" campaign (the equivalent of telling manic depressives to "just cheer up") have returned drug education and treatment to the Reefer Madness era.

Since 1980 the President and Nancy Reagan, Attorney General Edwin Meese 3d and White House drug policy advisers such as Dr. Carlton Turner, have made numerous rash and absurd statements about drugs. Dr. Turner claimed that smoking marijuana leads to AIDS (the sequence: Pot leads to harder drugs, which lead to sharing needles, which leads to AIDS). Peter Bensinger, former head of the Drug Enforcement Administration, claimed that marijuana was harmful because it "contained dioxin." The dioxin, of course, came from government spraying. Such statements are reminiscent of the 1920s, when the public was told that cocaine made blacks impervious to bullets.

Truth has been the first casualty in this so-called war on drugs. When Reagan labeled drug abuse "an evil scourge" that has become the nation's number-one social problem, during the 1986 campaign, the nation had been whipped up into such a frenzy that polls showed the citizenry believed him. On October 27, 1986, Reagan got what he championed: the fifty-fifth Federal antidrug bill in eighty years. Congress authorized \$3.96 billion to attack what *Newsweek*, with typical hyperbole, compared to "the plagues of medieval times." (That plague wiped out two-thirds of the people in Europe. According to government statistics, in 1979 3,500 deaths were attributed to illicit drugs. No deaths, incidentally, were caused by marijuana.) Then, after the elections, Reagan cut \$1 billion from his own war on drugs program and, in the harshest blow, recommended that no money be spent on drug rehabilitation and treatment in fiscal 1988.

Like the Red Menace of the early 1950s, the current drug hysteria has led to a loyalty oath—this time, the urine test. Extrapolating from margin-of-error figures supplied by manufacturers of standard drug tests (5 percent) and instances of laboratory mishandling documented by the Centers for Disease Control (15 to 20 percent), one can easily agree with a Northwestern University report claiming a national error rate of up to 25 percent. That means roughly one of every four persons tested for controlled substances could wrongly be fired, not hired or denied promotion.

But Reagan's not one to quibble about margins of error or unreasonable biochemical searches. Last year, when he announced the notorious drug-free workplace edict, he targeted Federal workers as an example for all labor. New applicants and tenured employees were forced to submit to urine tests. Of course, he wants to test all workers in America, which is rapidly occurring: In the private sector an estimated 35 million people were screened this year and the White House hopes to see 90 million being tested by 1990.

It is time to rethink a complex problem like drug abuse and disregard the simplistic nonsense of the Reagan antidrug campaign, which has ignored scientific evidence and overridden fundamental values of privacy and due process.



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