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The dispute over the legality of marijuana is a major controversy these days. Marijuana has been both demonized as a harmful narcotic and praised as a drug to heal you and set you free. However, one side is clearly dominant over the other in the United States. This is obvious due to the government spending billions of dollars every year to stop the distribution and smoking of marijuana. Not only this, the war against marijuana has caused hundreds of thousands of users and distributors to be jailed every year.

For such an effort from the government and marijuana antagonists to stop the usage of the drug, there must be a logical explanation as to how this all started. One would believe that it must be due to the horrific effects marijuana has on its users. According to pbs.org, this is definitely not why marijuana was first criminalized. The recreational use of marijuana appeared in the United States after 1910 when a large flood of Mexican immigrants came after the Mexican Revolution ended. From this time through the 1930's, fear was instilled in the white populous as rumors and newspaper propaganda articles declared a "Mexican Menace" and spoke of atrocities committed by Mexicans while under the influence of marijuana. Anti-marijuana propaganda became so wide-spread that a movie called "Reefer Madness" was produced in 1936. In 1937, Congress finally fell under the influence of this marijuana propaganda started by racists and passed the "Marijuana Tax Act," officially criminalizing marijuana throughout the entire United States.

Our country has changed over the years, and much more extensive research has been done over marijuana. The argument has changed from racism to something completely different. Joseph A. Califano, Jr. gives many reasons as to why marijuana is bad for our country in his essay "The Right Drug to Target: Cutting Marijuana Use." Califano begins his essay with a clear backing to keep marijuana criminalized. He states that the potency of marijuana has increased over the years, making it far more dangerous, especially for teenagers. He backs his statement by claiming that there has been an increase of teens being admitted

to hospital emergency rooms while under the influence of marijuana. Another assumption that he makes is that marijuana causes poor short term memory, lack of concentration, reduction of motor skills, and depression. He is convinced that if we stop teens from smoking marijuana that they will never try it later in life, and that parents are the first line of defense to stop them from doing so. The final assumption he makes is that if we increase the already abhorrent arrest rate, it will discourage the use of marijuana.

These assumptions are more logical than those found in the 1930's, but are still poorly made. Califano states that there has been an "increased potency of today's marijuana"(565). The potency of marijuana has, in fact, not increased over the years. According to Kevin Bonsor on howstuffworks.com, all testing done in the 1960's and in recent years on the levels of THC, the mind altering ingredient in marijuana, have been inconsistent with the regions where the marijuana was grown. Different types of marijuana plants have different levels of THC, ranging from .4 percent to 15 percent. This makes it clear that one who wishes to criminalize marijuana could easily skew the results and claim that the potency has risen over the past thirty years by comparing the two extremes of THC levels.

Califano also claims that the "number of teen emergency room admissions in which marijuana is implicated is up to almost 50 percent since 1999"(565). If marijuana is involved in emergency room admissions, for what reason are the teenagers in the hospital? Most likely he has misinterpreted information, mistaken correlation for causality to play on the emotions of readers. These admissions could have nothing to do with the fact that the teens were high, considering that no person in history has ever died of an overdose of marijuana. The increase of admissions could only correlate with the increase of marijuana use. The teens could be acting irresponsibly as most teens do, whether they are inebriated or not. Alcohol on the other hand, a legal drug and the most commonly used drug in the United States, has caused many deaths due to overdose. According to Narconon of Southern California Rehab Center at drug-overdose.com, there has never been a case in the statistics kept by the United States where someone has died from a marijuana overdose. With alcohol, it only requires ten times the amount to get drunk in order to kill someone.

Although this sounds contrary to what one would say to promote the legalization of marijuana, it is true what Califano states about how marijuana "adversely affects short-term memory, the ability to

concentrate, and motor skills”(566). However, short term memory loss is primarily felt by those who abuse marijuana and alcohol. Furthermore, the latter two side-effects are only true while the person is actually high on the drug and the same effects are felt by those who drink alcohol. If the government is willing to legalize one substance which causes a worse form of these side effects, why would they criminalize the other? He continues his argument about the unhealthy side-effects of marijuana by stating that “studies indicate that it increases the likelihood of depression...”(566). The effects of marijuana on depression are not what Califano states. He has most likely received his data from biased sources to support his claim. Marijuana’s effects on depression are not black and white according to an article from the U.S. Institute of Medicine found on procon.org. There have been varied results on the alleviation and causation of depression through use of marijuana. It seems to depend mostly on the person as to what effect there will be, just as there is with every drug on the market. This would give reason not to criminalize marijuana, but to allow for doctor prescribed marijuana just as this is the case with other prescription drugs.

Califano states that “if we can get kids not to smoke marijuana before they reach age 21, they are virtually certain never to do so”(566). His view of human behavior seems to be mistaken when he believes that just because as a teenager a person may not do drugs, that they will not in the future. A person’s life is constantly changing. Situations may press one to do drugs such as marijuana, or may push them away from it. It has little to do with trying to brainwash our children that smoking pot is bad for them. His argument has some truth to it, however, when he mentions parents as the “first line of defense.” It is a parent’s responsibility to raise a child as he or she sees fit. A parent’s teachings or discipline may keep a child away from drugs as long as that child resides under the parent’s care. Once liberated, however, an adult then must take the responsibility of making his or her own decisions, which again may lead towards or away from drugs. In the end, trying to convince children of the horrors of marijuana can only be a short term weapon until it comes down to their necessity to make a decision for themselves.

Finally Califano states that “we should use the increased arrest rate as an opportunity to discourage marijuana use”(566). This is possibly the worst action the United States could make against marijuana use. There is absolutely nothing to gain from jailing marijuana users. All that it accomplishes is costing the

citizens of this country billions of tax dollars to fund government raids and prisons. There is no reason to increase the burden of taxes already set on the citizens of the United States to stop the use of a drug which is nowhere near as dangerous as alcohol. At most, there should be laws to keep people from abusing marijuana, as there are laws against abusing alcohol.

Some aspects of this argument which are most important are not even discussed in Califano's essay. These arguments that deal with marijuana use are: the fact that as citizens of the United States we have a freedom of choice, that treating drug users as criminals is wrong, and that allowing or possibly regulating legalized pot could lead to more responsible use and less violence.

For most people, the concept of freedom of choice is a glorified idea rather than an actual political philosophy. This is why the legalization of pot is such an argued subject. An easy way to resolve this issue is to look at a key fact: as citizens of the United States, we have the right to do as we please as long as we do not infringe on the rights of others. The point of the creation of the United States was to allow for the pursuit of happiness. As long as you hurt no one else, who is to say that you cannot do what you want? To criminalize a drug because there is a social demand to do so based on reasons which have nothing to do with infringing on the rights of individuals in the society can be considered socialism. By looking at the Constitution, it states nothing about allowing socialistic policies, but promotes freedom of the individual. Found on archives.gov, at the beginning of the Constitution it states that there is an assurance of "the secure Blessings of Liberty," nothing about controlling a person's action that does not degenerate the well-being of society. All that marijuana does is give U.S. citizens a facet for relief of their everyday lives, the same way alcohol and smoking does.

If the Constitution is not proof enough of how wrong it is to criminalize marijuana, then perhaps the fact that arresting innocent people will help. A pot smoker is no different than a person who drinks alcohol. Sitting at home and smoking a joint with a friend is no different than having a beer with a buddy. Because this is the case, there is no justification for arresting the pot smoker, while allowing the drinker to stay free. The pot smoker is not stealing nor damaging another citizen's property. The pot smoker is not physically harming anyone. There is nothing that makes him or her more of a criminal than one who drinks. Also, to

claim that the addictive properties of marijuana will cause a person to end up a criminal in order to pay for the habit is no more a statement than to say a pop drinker will do the same. According to studies found on procon.org, the level of addictiveness of pot is no greater than that of caffeine. The level of addictiveness for alcohol is far greater, which should cause for greater concern of such illegal activity.

The final reason as to why marijuana should be legalized is simple as well; it will cause people to use the drug more responsibly and in a safer environment. The prohibition of alcohol is a good example as to how criminalizing a substance can lead only to violent activity and irresponsible use of the substance. During the prohibition, mob bosses like Al Capone were able to make money on the black market by making and distributing alcohol, while also committing crimes of violence in order to keep their money flowing. This is the same with today and drug dealers. They use the laws to their advantage by selling marijuana at ridiculous prices and create violence to get their money. With legalized pot, people will be able to buy marijuana on a more established economic system, or grow it themselves without worrying about dealing with real criminals. This will also allow them to relax and smoke marijuana responsibly without worrying about the police.

So allow the pot smokers to stay free. There is nothing that they have done to negatively affect society. Allow them to enjoy their relatively safe drug in peace. There is no reason to go wasting tax dollars to continue a tradition which was originally based on racism. In the United States, people should be free to do what they please as long as no one else gets hurt. No one, not other citizens, police, politicians, not even the president should be allowed to say whether or not a person is allowed to responsibly smoke marijuana. Pot smokers and drug free citizens should not allow for the persecution of this harmless habit. Legalize this substance and see your tax money go to better use.

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