

# REEFER MADNESS

BY MICHAEL McCUSKER

My drugs of choice are red wine and marijuana. One is legal, the other is not, and I have not heard a rational reason why. There is no logic that one should be benignly supported while the other makes criminals of its users and producers.

My Sicilian grandfather made wine "for the Church" during Prohibition, and kept a few bottles for himself which could have got him arrested — but marijuana was legal then. Eighty years later I can legally drink the wine but if I intake some bud I am subject to jail. Does this particular reversal of laws regarding my favorite recreational drugs make any sense?

Friends have been arrested and charged with growing marijuana, invaded by squads of drugbusters who claim to act on telephone tips that marijuana was growing in their homes or their outdoor hemp farms spotted by helicopters. Why shouldn't they also attack grape vineyards and arrest the vintners of wine?

I love wine. I believe the wheel is overrated; discovery of the fermentation of grapes is among the greatest of human achievements. So also is the cultivation of cannabis in its infinite varieties. The wheel might have sent humanity off on its course of exploring the mechanical universe; acidulation of grapes and harvests of cannabis have been indispensable to the exploration of intellectual and spiritual cosmos. (*In vino veritas; in cannabis vertigo.*)

Next only to sex, sipping a glass of red wine and puffing on a joint are ambrosia. Yet these two superb human pleasures and expanders of intellect and often of love are falsely wrenched apart. The wine is stamped with public approval and cognoscenti appeal. Marijuana is stained with depravity and its users are portrayed as irresponsible lawbreakers condemned to become addicted to heavyweight narcotics.

Perhaps it is time for those who like a little smoke of euphoria or the taste of galactic brownies to speak out against these distortions of truth and the spurious injustice of laws that punish pleasure. Our ancestors, who were not allowed many pleasures either, had to wrest liberty from kings and tyrants and from powerful institutions that grew up in their place. If we do not want these hardwon liberties to go up in smoke we had better wake up, quell our trembling and refuse to be denied our pleasures and privacies or we will have neither.

The War on Drugs so blithely heralded is nothing more than a cynical assault on our civil liberties by a government that would increase its power by dissolving the bonds that hold us together. Public hysteria is whipped up against a few euphoric chemicals that like food or sex are dangerous only when gluttony overcomes moderation. The society is infected with fear, in particular its vulnerability to crime which is associated with drug use instead of social conditions which produce both the obsessive consumption of drugs and the lucrative market for them. The smarmy pieties of political ayatollahs decry the use of drugs while in classic hand/tongue duplicity, pocket payoffs to keep the trade profitable through legal oppression.

The big money is the real addiction. It has made bribe junkies out of the nation's lawmakers and many of its enforcers. Spacing out once in awhile is not what is enervating our decaying society: Corruption, the crazy compulsive pursuit of cash and power regardless of source and heedless of the pricetag are the historical indicators of societal decline. The pursuit of wealth by any means fair or foul which leaves even greater numbers of people impoverished and wrecks the productivity of a society is the true sign of decay and decline. It is usually then, when everything starts falling apart, that large masses search for opiates to escape their crumbling lives.

Overuse of anything is dangerous. Coffee, hamburgers, butter and sugar are known killers. Alcohol not only addicts millions, it is a direct cause of the automobile fatalities of hundreds of thousands more; alcohol also is responsible for violent behavior (even my beloved wine) that results in countless beatings and deaths of wives, children, friends and strangers. Cigarettes kill more slowly, more certainly, but I have yet to hear a tobacco company acknowledge responsibility for the lingering often agonizing deaths of the very people (about 400,000 a year, which is one out six persons who die annually) who provide its wealth.

Moderation is the genius of Shangri La — moderation in all things pleasurable, philosophical and political. American culture is instead founded on excess. The United States, aside from its passionate addiction to money and shopping, is also the world's largest consumer of addictive chemical substances. The usual blame is placed upon a malaise of spirit of the seekers of chemically-induced nirvana, not the incessant values of rapacity and greed of the society itself. Money, sex and drugs have been the American corporate dream since the advent of hucksterism. For the dream weavers to absolve responsibility by placing guilt on the buyers of the mesmerizing visions is pure mendacity.



MARK WILSON

Drug Free America? How absurd! No more pharmaceutical compounds? Prozac banned? Prohibition once more of grape vineyards and hops fields? The arrest and conviction of tobacco farmers and their government lobbyists? You've got to be kidding.

This nation consumes more drugs of infinite variety and purpose on a daily basis than the rest of the world combined. Our real problem is not the drugs we ingest, or our reasons for requiring or desiring them, but our capacity for acquiescing to zealots who corrupt the public tolerance with hysterical exaggerations, proclamations and demands that we deny our pleasures of flesh and flora. (H. L. Mencken once defined Puritans as those who are disturbed that someone somewhere is having a good time.) We allow people to have power over us who assume we are collectively as stupid and avariciously deceitful as they are — and so far in regard to the trampling of our civil rights in the Drug War we have not shown them much reason to doubt their misconceptions. We permit these pathological simpletons to intrude their gross appetites for power upon our forms of relaxation and bliss.

As a result we are separated not only by class, sex and race but also by our choices of pleasure. We are separated by intimidation and edict. We are compartmentalized, broken into segments of suspicion and fear like three-person communist cells. Instead of rallying to our friends and neighbors who are assaulted by improper police invasions of their homes and selves, we shun them in fear our own vices might also be investigated if we demonstrate support or solidarity. The War on Drugs (in alliance with the War on Terrorism) balkanizes us.

Perhaps you have not noticed the squelching of contrary views to the War on Drugs, the fearful disinclination of public protest to the government's juggernaut against civil liberties disguised as a moral crusade against drug use. Several years ago Oregon was almost among the most progressive states regarding cultivation and personal use of marijuana. But the big guns of suppression, who kept the matter off the ballot by improperly disregarding initiative signatures several times, mounted large and expensive (not to mention ample use

of hysteria and misinformation) campaigns to defeat allowing cultivation of the evil weed for personal use.

The incongruous irony is that Oregon like other states is catastrophically afflicted by the policies of transferring the remainder of the nation's wealth to those who already have most of it, which leaves the rest of the people without much although they are expected to make up the public deficit. Oregon's salvation from the adversity can very well be the hemp agriculture that is considered the state's most abundant and lucrative crop. Tax revenues from open and legal cultivation of marijuana would catapult the state to among the richest.

Instead the controversy about how to raise money centers on sales taxes (which state voters have nixed nine times so far) with not even a mention of legalizing marijuana and utilizing its immense potential as a cash crop. The lack of imagination and rigid prejudices of the state's legal, political and piety cliques not only indicate a perversity of self-flagellation but seem unperturbed about financing state ministries and public services with gambling, alcohol and tobacco revenues.

Thousands of Oregonians are criminals only because they prefer marijuana to the legally sanctioned abuse of alcohol, and as a result their freedoms and personal lives are in jeopardy simply because they enjoy the celestial hemp more than (or alongside) the intemperance of whiskey or wine. The repressive atmosphere surrounding the right to choose one's own poison has sent scurrying out of view the very people who could preserve their liberties and freedom from harassment and jail by openly insisting the electoral process (which has more or less failed because they seem too optimistic about public awareness to effectively wrestle the drug lords of alcohol and tobacco) exemplify their point of view. Dr. Frederick Oerther, long a strong voice for legalization of marijuana and candidate for governor of Oregon, said when arrested for cultivating marijuana for his personal use, "I see a light at the end of the tunnel, and it is the Bill of Rights burning."

So what shall we do? Sit on our fannies in fear and helplessly watch our friends disappear until at some point, for some reason, we are also victims of an increasingly repressive government, or shall we finally rise up and tell the ministries of fear and repression to go to hell?



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