

Home / Features / Don't Believe The (Marijuana) Hype

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By *Maia Szalavitz* 01/13/14

What most people think they know about marijuana—especially media columnists—is just years of unscientific, paranoid, and even racist government propaganda.



Reefer madness is contagious. Photo [via](#)

Everyone thinks they know something about drugs—whether from personal experience or from 8th grade prevention classes or simply because the media presents so many stories about them. Unfortunately, most of what people *think* they know is inaccurate, and comes from years of government [war-on-drugs propaganda](#), with little understanding of its [medical](#) and historical context.

Take last week's [absurd anti-marijuana columns](#) and [tweets](#) from some of the backbones of the media establishment: the *New York Times*' [David Brooks](#), [Ruth Marcus](#) of the *Washington Post* and Tina Brown, former *New Yorker* editor and founder of the *Daily Beast*.

Both Brooks and Marcus told stories of their own youthful pot smoking—neither of which seems to have led to any lasting negative consequences as is the case for the overwhelming majority of marijuana users. Yet both claimed—without apparently understanding that relying on a [single study](#) that has been questioned in a follow up by the same journal is not accurately reporting “fact”—that marijuana definitively lowers IQ.

"This marijuana causes white women to seek sexual relations with Negroes, entertainers and any others."

And neither mentioned the elephant in the room: [the fact that marijuana laws are mainly enforced against black people](#) and that arresting millions and saddling them with criminal records hasn't prevented around half of the adult population (white and black) from trying weed. It has, however, meant that black people have reduced opportunities to get jobs with organizations like the *Times* or the *Post* while Brooks and Marcus never faced arrest.

Conveniently, the columnists also left out the fact that countries like [Portugal](#) that have decriminalized marijuana (or places like Holland that tolerate some commercial sales of marijuana) actually have *lower* rates of youth drug use than we do.

Meanwhile, Tina Brown also tweeted that marijuana makes people stupid and legalization will reduce our ability to compete with China. Suffice it to say that she has little evidence for such a claim—one might argue based on equally flimsy data that it enhances creativity and popular culture, which is one of our true strengths—but that wouldn't sound appropriately “serious.”

And right there is the problem: columnists and journalists who write about drugs rarely question conventional wisdom or go beyond cherry-picking of data to support what they already “know.”

But why are we so gullible in this area, when reporters are supposed to be skeptical? One reason has got to be the fact that over the last 40 years, the government has [spent billions of dollars](#) on advertising and even [planted media articles and messages](#) in TV shows aiming to get us all to “just say no.” While these campaigns are often ineffective at preventing use, they do seem to work at clouding perception.

And the truth is seen as immaterial in the drug war. Written into the [job description of the “drug czar”](#) by Congress is that whoever heads the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) must “take such actions as necessary to oppose any attempt to legalize the use of a substance (in any form)” that is currently illegal, regardless of the facts. When asked about its distribution of “misleading information”—by a Congressman, in fact—ONDCP cited this provision to justify doing so, saying that this is “within the statutory role assigned to ONDCP.” In other words, they have to lie.

Rare is the journalist who will admit to having fallen for this outright propaganda, which is why last year's confession by CNN's chief medical correspondent Dr. Sanjay Gupta that he was wrong about marijuana was so stunning.

On CNN's website, [he wrote](#):

I mistakenly believed the Drug Enforcement Agency listed marijuana as a schedule 1 substance because of sound scientific proof. Surely, they must have quality reasoning as to why marijuana is in the category of the most dangerous drugs that have "no accepted medicinal use and a high potential for abuse."

They didn't have the science to support that claim, and I now know that when it comes to marijuana neither of those things are true. It doesn't have a high potential for abuse, and there are very legitimate medical applications.

The truth is that our perceptions of marijuana—and in fact all of our drug laws—are based on early 20th century racism and “science” circa the Jim Crow era. In the early decades of the 20th century, the drug was linked to Mexican immigrants and black jazzmen, who were seen as potentially dangerous.

Harry Anslinger, the first commissioner of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (an early predecessor of the DEA), was one of the driving forces behind pot prohibition. He pushed it for [explicitly racist reasons](#), saying, “Reefer makes darkies think they're as good as white men,” and:

"There are 100,000 total marijuana smokers in the U.S., and most are Negroes, Hispanics, Filipinos and entertainers. Their Satanic music, jazz and swing result from marijuana use. This marijuana causes white women to seek sexual relations with Negroes, entertainers and any others."

The main reason to prohibit marijuana, he said was “its effect on the degenerate races.” (And god forbid women should sleep with entertainers!)

Although it sounds absurd now, it was this type of propaganda that caused the drug to be outlawed in 1937—along with support from the Hearst newspapers, which ran ads calling marijuana “the assassin of youth” and published stories about how it led to violence and insanity. Anslinger remained as head of federal narcotics efforts as late as 1962, whereafter he spread his poisonous message to the world as the American representative to the U.N. for drug policy for a further two years.

Before marijuana was made illegal, the American Medical Association's [opposition to prohibition was ignored](#), as was an earlier report on marijuana in India by the British government, which did not find marijuana to be particularly addictive or dangerous. That “Indian Hemp Drugs Committee” [report](#) had concluded way back in 1894 that, “The moderate use of hemp drugs is practically attended by no evil results at all.”

Pundits and columnists who make pronouncements about marijuana's dangers seem willfully ignorant of this history, which is easy to check via any online search engine. It seems unlikely that Brooks, Marcus and Brown would want their names associated with a law that is both explicitly racist in intent—and continually racist in outcome.

But until we treat drug issues as medical and scientific questions, we will be doomed to continue this bigoted legacy—and we will not be able to treat addiction as the health issue that it is.

So, just say *know* when it comes to drugs—and be sure what you know is based in science, not ancient biased nonsense. (Though, on second thought, Anslinger may have had a point about the inadvisability of sexual relations with entertainers, particularly musicians.)

Maia Szalavitz is a columnist at The Fix. She is also a health reporter at [Time magazine online](#), and co-author, with Bruce Perry, of [Born for Love: Why Empathy Is Essential—and Endangered](#) (Morrow, 2010), and author of [Help at Any Cost: How the Troubled-Teen Industry Cons Parents and Hurts Kids](#) (Riverhead, 2006).

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