

# GETTING HIGH

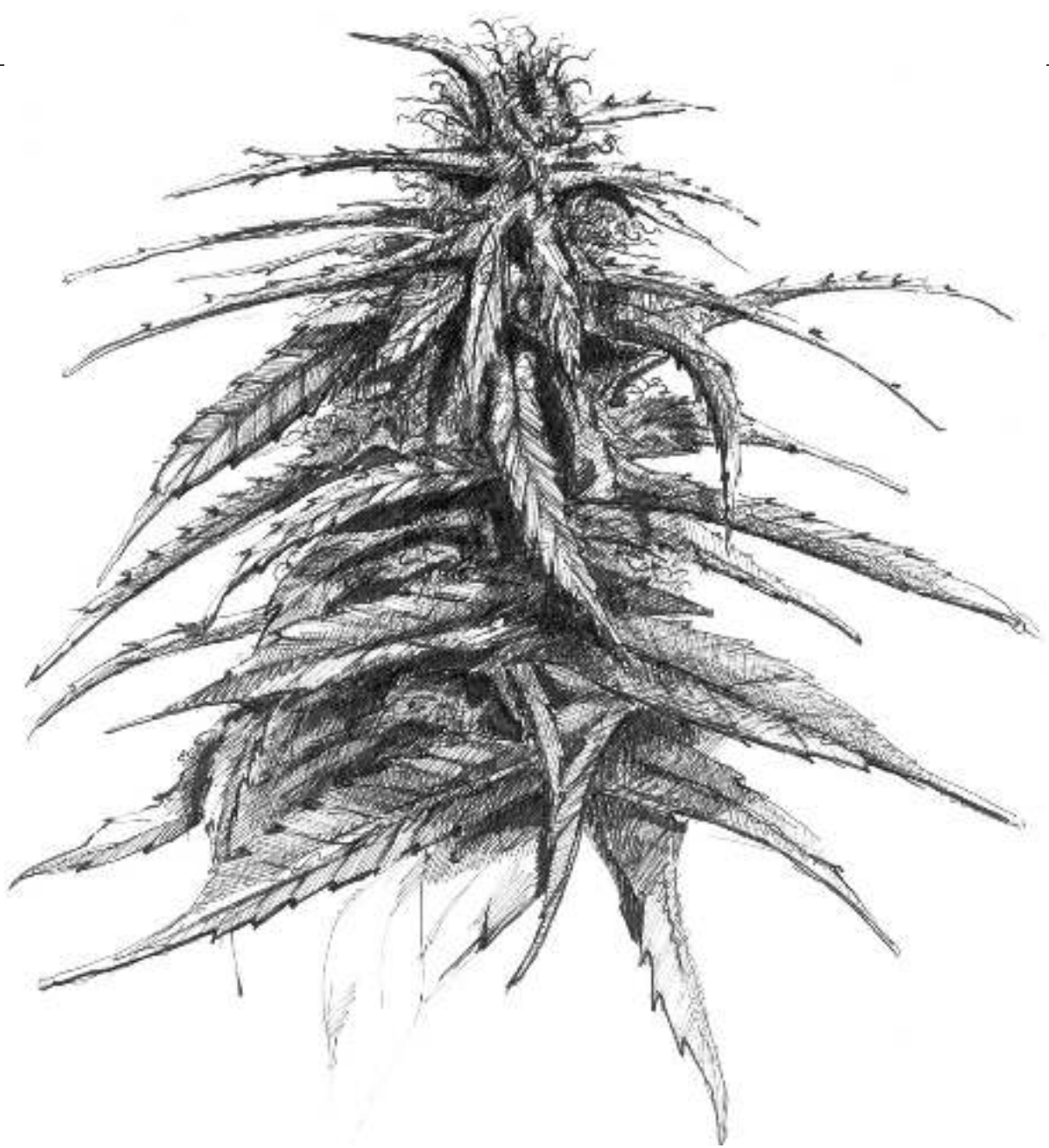
MARIJUANA THROUGH THE AGES



JOHN CHARLES CHASTEEN

# Getting High

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*Mature female flowering top.*

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## Marijuana through the Ages

John Charles Chasteen

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To the Riamba Bros.

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actual and honorary

living and dead

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# Getting High

**J**ust wait until people our age are running things. Then everything will change. My sixteen-year-old friends and I had no doubts in the matter, around 1970. We assured each other, when we smoked marijuana, that a new dawn was inevitable in a world that was “turning on.” Marijuana, we believed, was a “mind-expanding” drug, somewhat like LSD, but much milder. The distinction was blurred anyway, because we often used them together. We supposed that anyone, particularly anyone young, would change their attitude, spontaneously abandoning racism or support of the Vietnam War, for example, under the mind-expanding influence of the drug. Marijuana would help anyone see through sham and resist mind control by “The System.” The problem was getting them off booze, which dulled perceptions, rather than heightening them.

My sixteen-year-old friends and I viewed getting high and getting drunk as rough opposites. Marijuana was the drug of our tribe, the cool, long-haired, rock-music-listening, faded-blue-jean-wearing tribe. Pot, as we called it most often, made people peaceful. Alcohol belonged to the *other* tribe, exemplified by hard-hat construction workers who drank beer and threatened to beat up “long hairs.” Alcohol stood for decadent tradition, and it made people violent.

We were wrong, of course, about the world, and also about pot’s irresistible persuasiveness. The world proved harder to remake than we had ever supposed. And the clarity of the 1970 tribes soon got muddled. By the 1990s, when I was a college professor sipping wine at faculty parties, men with long hair seemed more likely to be construction workers than students. Pot and beer no longer seemed like opposites, either. Marijuana’s mind-expanding qualities had gotten lost.

Did it ever really possess them?

This book looks at marijuana in the long view of world history. It asks who used it, how, and why. Unlike most published versions of the drug’s history, it places marijuana within larger historic patterns, such as migration, colonialism, and religion. It also keeps the marijuana/beer comparison in mind throughout. Above all, it asks whether marijuana really possesses mind-expanding powers.

A simple question, perhaps, but without a simple answer. For starters, the effects of the drug are variable and subjective. Consider the complexities. The same dose can affect different people differently, and the same person differently at different moments. That’s true of alcohol, too, but true of marijuana. Its effect will vary according to expectations. To a degree, altered consciousness is always a blank screen onto which people project their expectations. Expectations play an enormous role in people’s reaction to *any* drug, of course, which is why placebos work. All this plays havoc with our attempts to characterize marijuana’s mind-altering qualities in the abstract.

To understand the effects of mind-altering drugs, it’s better to ask how they are *used* in everyday life. Like alcohol, marijuana is often used just for fun. That is because, like alcohol, it is a “euphoriant” that triggers a surge of dopamine in the brains of users. Many recreational drugs are euphoriants, but their effects vary. The point of recreational use is simply to enhance the moment by stepping out of

ordinary consciousness. Often, the fact that drugs *somehow* alter ordinary consciousness matters more than just *how* they alter it. Recreational use is generally social. It facilitates interpersonal bonding and generally greases the social gears. That is why, like drinking alcohol, smoking marijuana is very commonly a collective activity. In the late-twentieth-century United States, millions of people who smoked marijuana socially when they were university students, drank alcohol socially later in life, getting fundamentally the same thing out of it, a shared experience of release from the ordinary.

Still, the two drugs contrast in some respects. Alcohol depresses the nervous system; marijuana does not. At high doses, the drinker may experience difficulty walking or, famously, pronouncing words and may black out or even, in extreme cases, die. Marijuana does not have those effects even at high doses. Instead, it creates distortions of normal perception and thought, as well as measurable deficits in reaction time, cognition, concentration, and memory. At high doses, it can produce visual hallucinations, such as the strobing arm movements that made my teenage friends look a little like Hindu deities. This is why pharmacologists tend to classify alcohol as a depressant, whereas they call marijuana's cognitive effects "hallucinogenic." The hallucinogenic effects, not shared by alcohol, seem to explain marijuana's allegedly mind-expanding qualities.

Scientific research now demonstrates that marijuana is a medical drug, too. A hundred years ago we knew that, but we'd forgotten. Cannabis has always figured in the pharmacopoeias of Europe and China, although these traditional medical uses, such as hempseed oil in the ear for earache, or cannabis-leaf poultices on a sprain, did not involve getting high. In addition, the euphoriant effect, when present, is a palliative that makes any ill more bearable. In the twenty-first century, research has revealed further medical uses. Marijuana's unique active ingredients, called *cannabinoids* (THC is the best known), have molecular shapes that fit receptors in our body's hormonal communication system, regulating mood and appetite, among other things. That's how marijuana can calm chronic seizures, restore appetite and reduce pain and nausea in patients undergoing chemotherapy or enduring AIDS, for example. At least one therapeutic cannabinoid molecule, called CBD, is not mood-altering at all. Moreover, cannabinoids have few deleterious side effects. There are pharmaceutical imitations, but the synthetics do not seem to provide the same kind of relief. Because experiments with cannabinoids led to the discovery of the hormonal system they affect, researchers call it the "endocannabinoid system." Note that this choice of name does *not* demonstrate that the human hormonal system evolved in conjunction with marijuana, however, as some have fantasized.

Ideas about the effects of marijuana have undergone several dramatic shifts in recent history. In the 1930s—which is *very* recent history on the global scale—marijuana was condemned by the U.S. government and the mass media as a "devil weed" that drove users criminally and violently insane. My teenage friends and I flocked (high, of course) to see midnight showings of the 1930s propagandist movie *Reefer Madness*, which by the 1970s seemed ridiculous to pretty much everybody. The 1970 audience died laughing, but the movie makers had been deadly serious. After all, Harry Anslinger, the head of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, had secured passage of the 1937 federal law making marijuana illegal partly by showing photographs of bloodied corpses—the typical work, he indicated, of the "reefer mad." He also deployed historical evidence, so to speak, claiming that the English word *assassin* derives, ultimately, from a sort of reefer madness that had existed in medieval Syria. We'll take a closer look at that idea later in the book. For now, let's note how absolutely the "assassin" image contrasted with that of pot-smoking hippies preaching "peace and love" in the 1960s. Then, by the 1980s and 1990s, another contrasting image emerged. Now the stereotypical marijuana smoker became stoner "couch potatoes," antisocial and riddled with "amotivational syndrome."

This variability is mostly a matter of social expectations, no doubt, but pharmacology helps explain

it somewhat. THC, short for delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol, is apparently the most mind-altering cannabinoid, but there are more than fifty others, at least three of which are also psychoactive. Different strains of cannabis—even, to a degree, individual plants—have differing endowments of cannabinoids. Furthermore, they interact, so their differing endowments create kaleidoscopic variations. (In contrast, a single molecule, *ethanol*, is the sole active ingredient of all alcoholic drinks.) Today’s cannabis connoisseurs, focusing on various strains sold as medical marijuana, say that more *sativa* hybrids go to the head, make one “high” without impeding activity, while more *indica* hybrids register in the body, making one more “stoned” and lethargic. Whatever . . .

Here’s the point. Marijuana is a mind-expanding drug when (and only when) people learn to use it that way. My teenage cronies and I did not invent such effects, nor did we discover them for ourselves. Instead, we read about them in books and magazines, heard about them on television and in the lyrics of rock music, before we ever tried marijuana. Perhaps the most influential description of the drug came from the poet Allen Ginsberg in his famous 1966 *Atlantic Monthly* article “The Great Marijuana Hoax,” which he wrote partly high and partly not in order to demonstrate marijuana’s effects on his thinking. His overall idea was that marijuana stimulates unconventional, and therefore creative, thought, which is what makes it interesting to artists. It was an idea famously shared by Jamaican reggae musicians, who believed that *ganja*, as they called marijuana, opened their minds to divine inspiration. Nor did Ginsberg and his generation make up this idea, of course. Early jazz players, such as Louis Armstrong, had their own version of it, as we will see. And so, too, did untold generations of ascetic holy men of Central and Southwest Asia, Sufis and Sannyasins who renounced the world in pursuit of their spiritual quest.

In fact, when one looks at who’s been using cannabis drugs in the last two or three thousand years, one sees that they have been mostly spiritual, rather than recreational, users. In other words, the drug has been prized more as a hallucinogen than a euphoriant. Cannabis use as a recreational euphoriant has, in fact, been rare in global history, concentrated in a few societies, never rivaling the social importance of alcohol. Recreational use of marijuana is rather modern, occurring most widely during the last century, whereas the spiritual uses are much older. In sum, the big picture of world history suggests that human beings have used marijuana *most often* as a mind-expanding drug.

## TROUBLE WITH THE POLICE

Why, then, is marijuana illegal? That’s the first question that any reasonable person is likely to ask at this point, and it deserves a straight answer. How did this very ancient and widespread crop, one of humankind’s original domesticated plants, become banned more or less worldwide? The gist of the answer lies in the next chapter.

For now, contemplate the dramatic impact of today’s anti-marijuana laws. The drug’s general illegality is among the first things anyone learns about it. In my case, as a middle-class American kid, I learned it from the 1960s televised detective series *Dragnet*, and then from the local broadcast news report, which ominously showed the house of family friends as a crime scene. Marijuana’s illegality constitutes a major reason why the United States now keeps more of its population in prison, by far, than other countries. Roughly half of the drug offenses tabulated annually by the FBI involve marijuana, and roughly half the inmates in federal penitentiaries are there for selling or, sometimes, for merely possessing it. The rampant incarceration associated with the “drug war” has weighed particularly on minority communities in the United States. Some police departments in the United States have begun routinely to seize the property of people accused of possessing marijuana, and the

often keep the property without filing formal charges. In essence, it's an institutionalized form of bribery and police corruption: "You had marijuana in your car, so we'll keep both marijuana and car and you'll say nothing or face drug charges." The main evidence of criminal activity landing many young New Yorkers in jail, when they are profiled and then "stopped and frisked," is a small amount of marijuana. The pervasive drug-testing programs maintained by many businesses effectively target only marijuana, which is detectable in the blood for a month, whereas the traces of other drugs disappear after a few days.

Since the 1970s, U.S. federal law has retained marijuana on its list of most-prohibited "controlled substances," those that it is a crime merely to possess and cannot be consumed under any circumstances. Despite advances in scientific understanding of the body's endocannabinoid system, federal law still specifies that marijuana has "no currently accepted medical use." This is the wording of the Controlled Substances Act, which lists marijuana in its "most dangerous" category, Schedule I, reserved for drugs that also produce "potentially severe psychological or physical dependence." Meanwhile, state laws have begun to vary, beginning with California's Compassionate Use Act of 1996, the first to permit possession and use of marijuana by a doctor's prescription.

The Compassionate Use Act emerged quite specifically in the wake of California's AIDS epidemic. About a dozen mostly western states followed suit in the early 2000s. By 2014, four western states—Washington, Oregon, Colorado, and Alaska—had legalized recreational use of the drug. The advent of the twenty-first century seemed to mark a turning point in the country's approach to marijuana.

Still, state initiatives to license and tax marijuana dispensaries are creating tension with the federal Drug Enforcement Administration, which refuses to recognize the dispensaries' state and local licenses. Diverse observers have noticed that some of the young men buying medical marijuana do not seem very sick. Moreover, serious considerations arise from the problem of producing legal marijuana for legal consumers. Various state laws have made provision for medical marijuana patients to grow a small number of plants for themselves. Mostly, however, the supply comes from licensed dispensaries, which buy marijuana from farmers (or indoor horticulturalists) whose activities are sometimes licensed and sometimes not. Decriminalization and legalization clearly stimulate demand and demand stimulates supply.

Supplying the demand created by millions of U.S. marijuana consumers—recreational and medical—has become a multimillion-dollar business. The demand is being met mostly by domestic production, both indoors and outdoors, in many states, especially western ones. Related growth is occurring north of the Canadian border in British Columbia. U.S. "homegrown" was once the worst-quality marijuana, but since the 1980s, domestic growers have crossed and selectively bred varieties of marijuana to an unprecedented degree, making U.S. (and Canadian) pot the most potent (and costly) anywhere. At many hundreds of dollars an ounce, its new price constitutes a radical departure from historic patterns. Many players, including some major corporations, are eyeing the market.

Until the drug war, marijuana had always been inexpensive when compared with, say, beer. Now, thanks to vigorous efforts to eradicate the burgeoning domestic crop and interdict illegal importation, high-grade marijuana retails for many dollars a gram. The vast resulting profits have attracted ruthless criminal organizations capable of building their own telecommunications networks and digging freight tunnels under the border between Tijuana and San Diego. Prohibition of marijuana has become a bonanza for organized crime, precisely as occurred in the 1920s with the prohibition of alcohol, except that these new mafias operate internationally. Various criminal trade cartels originating in Jamaica, Colombia, Venezuela, and, more recently, Mexico and Central America have become powerful enough to threaten the integrity of these countries' governments. Turf wars among criminally

traffickers produce horrific bloodshed. In recent years, the violence has been most intense in Mexico and Central America, as various militarized criminal syndicates vie with one another to supply the U.S. market. The U.S. market is their major market, too. The level of consumption in Mexico—measured by “annual prevalence,” the proportion of the population that uses it at least once a year—about a tenth of the U.S. level, according the UN *World Drug Report*.

Increasingly, state-level legalization makes the mayhem of the drug war look irrational. While attitudes have fluctuated since the 1960s, reliable opinion surveys have found that by 2013 a growing majority of Americans, especially the young, believed that marijuana should be legalized. A substantial older, more rural, and more religious minority remains quite opposed, however, and “rescheduling” marijuana at the federal level seems unlikely in an era of Republican political hegemony. State-level initiatives have been notably rare in culturally conservative southern and midwestern states. The West, instead, with its countercultural and also libertarian traditions, has led the way. Medical marijuana initiatives and subsequent legalization of recreational use did not emerge from a cultural vacuum. For example, the author of California’s landmark 1996 medical marijuana law, Dennis Peron, was a San Francisco gay-rights activist whose dying partner had been incarcerated for use of marijuana. To judge by the rapid multiplication of licensed dispensaries, smoking marijuana was already pretty common in the communities where they have opened.

Despite changing attitudes, we may well see an enduring split between red states and blue and a standoff at the federal level. Forty years ago, the National Commission on Marihuana and Drug Abuse reached the conclusion that, when it came to its status in the United States, the drug’s main sins were essentially political. It’s still true. The Shafer Commission, so called for its Republican chairman named by President Nixon, was the federal government’s most notable attempt ever to decide the legal status of marijuana by thoughtful study. This panel of medical experts found occasional recreational use of marijuana to be relatively safe, although it *was* concerned about the much smaller number of daily users. Its members worried, too, that marijuana might lead to experimentation with “harder” drugs, particularly heroin. The commissioners found no social harms, in other words, to rank with alcoholism. At the end of their deliberations, however, wavering between decriminalization and outright legalization, they bowed to public opinion. According to their survey data, in the early 1970s an ample majority of Americans viewed marijuana as simply wrong and “a rejection of enduring American values.” That decided the commissioners against legalization. Instead, the Shafer commission recommended the *decriminalization* of marijuana use, whereby people would not be prosecuted for using or possessing small quantities, while commercialization would remain criminal, as had been the case with alcohol in the 1920s.

But the commission’s recommendation fell on deaf ears. Faced with a conflict between science and the instincts of his political base, the president who had appointed the Shafer Commission simply ignored its findings. By that time, he had already preemptively declared a “War on Drugs.”

Meanwhile, the old idea of “reefer madness” has been definitively discarded, along with the old idea of marijuana’s addictiveness. This was a big change from the early twentieth century, when marijuana was called a “narcotic,” a loose category that then included cocaine, too. The idea of addiction was then popularly associated with all “narcotics.” The real narcotics—opium and its “opiate” derivatives, morphine and heroin, as well as synthetic “opioids”—truly are addictive. They produce physical withdrawal symptoms when suddenly discontinued, “cold turkey.” Since the 1960s, researchers have recognized that marijuana does not create that kind of “physical addiction.”

Some still suggest that marijuana can nonetheless be habit-forming, and they are surely correct. To satisfy any kind of craving can be habit-forming. There need not be any drug involved. Rece

experimental science is able to see habits forming at the molecular level, so to speak. It turns out that our brain's response to euphoriant drugs resembles our brain's response to substances like "comfort foods" and activities like gambling and sex. Habitual stimulation of the brain's "pleasure circuitry" centers over time "hardwires" neurological circuitry toward the source of stimulation. Simultaneously, though, it also buffers neuronal transmissions at the synapses, thereby encouraging similar—and more intense—stimulation. What was once called "psychological dependence" can now be understood as a neurological process by which people become oriented toward a particular source of pleasure, be it marijuana or alcohol, tobacco or pornography, roulette or bacon.

Given current scientific knowledge, federal prohibition of marijuana lacks any logical basis. Federal scheduling incorrectly declares the drug to have no medical applications. Alcohol and tobacco both present greater health risks. The most persuasive arguments against legalizing marijuana focus on children, because of their evident greater vulnerability than adults. Psychologists have described juvenile amotivational syndrome, a socially isolating, long-term dependence that leads to apathy, bad grades, poor choice of friends, and emotional alienation from parents. Amotivational syndrome figures prominently in parent-centered campaigns against drug abuse. Another discredited but persistently evoked threat to children is that of the hypothetical "gateway drug," admitted to be more or less harmless in itself but threatening because it leads to "harder" drugs, such as heroin.

Clearly, drugs in general are bad for children, but the idea that marijuana inherently threatens them more than alcohol or tobacco is just fear-mongering. An illegal gateway drug is more easily sampled by young people, because buying illegal drugs requires no age identification. Illegality itself constitutes the gateway to be entered. Once inside the gate, one grows used to breaking the law and encounters various other drugs in the illegal marketplace. Take away the illegality, and the gateway disappears. Amotivational syndrome and the gateway-drug idea are effective anti-marijuana arguments, not because they are strong arguments, but because they are about protecting the young, an area where we want to err on the side of caution. They are really not specifically about the effects of marijuana. In fact, a hundred years ago, protecting the young was a principal argument for the prohibition of alcohol.

Which brings us to the last-ditch argument against marijuana. This argument begins by admitting marijuana to be no worse than alcohol and by recognizing the failed experience of national Prohibition in the 1920s. Nonetheless, continues this line of argumentation, we should strive to feel "high on life" without any chemical "crutch." Legalizing other recreational drugs will "send the wrong message" to young people because—and here's the nub—euphoriant drugs are bad. They distract people from the path to true happiness. We should strive for a "drug-free society." Whether or not it mentions religion, this argument is based on moral values derived from religious faith. Many Christians, Muslims, and even Buddhists share this idea. Reasonable people can disagree, but this attitude of moral censure is politically potent, especially in the United States. It's rather reminiscent, in my view, of the sentiments that persuaded the Shafer Commission not to recommend legalization of marijuana in the 1970s.

A final impact of marijuana's current illegality has more practical than moral ramifications. Not all cannabis is marijuana. The distinctive five-pointed compound leaf so well known in the United States as marijuana also belongs to common *hemp*, which does not possess enough cannabinoids to get anyone high. The currently accepted scientific name of both marijuana and hemp is *Cannabis sativa*. The men who wrote the 1937 law making marijuana effectively illegal did not differentiate it from hemp. They defined "marihuana" as "all parts of the plant *Cannabis sativa*." The result was to abolish the well-established U.S. hemp crop overnight, except for a brief federal program that encouraged growing "Hemp for Victory" during World War II. Today, processed hemp fiber and hempseed oil can

be imported from Canada and several European countries, as can sterilized hempseed for bird food but hemp itself can still not be grown in the United States. Proponents of hemp legalization have good (although frequently overblown) arguments to make in favor of the crop, which has many applications. The arguments against legalizing it still cite the difficulty of telling hemp and marijuana apart. What, exactly, is the difference? To trace marijuana's progress around the world, we will have to know it when we see it.

## MEET THE CANNABIS PLANT

Hemp was wrongfully incriminated in 1937, so to speak, by its close botanical relationship to marijuana. The hemp form of cannabis had been a common crop in Europe, and then in the United States, for centuries. Never, before the 1900s, however, did it occur to anyone that a drug could be derived from domestic European hemp. To see why, you have to watch the plant grow.

Plant cannabis seeds close together, and the seedlings race upward toward the sunlight in competition with each other, becoming mostly stem. A hemp crop looks a little like a field of skinny, tangled, impossibly dense, ten-foot-tall bamboo. Hemp farmers grow their crop for the long, cane-like stems because that's where the fibers are. Plant cannabis seeds far apart, on the other hand, and the result is less stemmy, much shorter, more like a bush, with denser foliage and more developed flowers. Marijuana farmers grow their crop for the flowers, especially, because that's where the cannabinoids are concentrated. Almost no one smokes cannabis leaves, particularly no one with access to the flowers.

A further complication: only female flowers will do. Unlike most plants, which have pistils and stamens in the same flower, cannabis has them in separate flowers and, almost always, on separate plants. Pollen tumbles out of tiny, pale yellow, bell-shaped male flowers and is carried by the wind to the female flowers, which are hard to recognize as such. Wind-pollinated plants don't have to attract insects with nectar or colored flower petals. The female cannabis flower is a greenish cluster of slender, feathery, translucent tendrils, called stigmas, which reach out a few millimeters hoping that floating pollen will come to rest on them. On and around the clusters of stigmas the blooming plant exudes a resin rich in cannabinoids.

If the flowers are pollinated, they stop blooming, produce no more resin, and go to seed. To grow a crop of abundantly blooming female plants, marijuana farmers cull male plants. In the male's absence, the never-to-be-pollinated female plants gamely persevere, producing more and more groping tendrils and more sticky resin, until finally they give up the ghost, leaving, at the end of each branch, a dense and withered clump of rust-colored stigmas and resinous crystals without seeds, a *sin semilla* bud. The clusters of *sin semilla* buds at the top of a single large plant can retail today in the United States for many thousands of dollars.

Marijuana and hemp are above all *crops*, products of cultivation. A cannabis plant only produces *sin semilla* (and all medical-grade marijuana is *sin semilla*) if the males are culled, as we have seen. Hemp farmers, on the other hand, grow both male and female plants. They harvest most of the crop *before* it flowers, because flowering takes the plant's energies and degrades the fiber. They do allow a portion of the crop to flower and make seeds for next year's crop. As wind-born hemp pollen blows through the thicket, the female flowers go to seed and shut down. No groping stigmas, no swelling buds, no spicy scent of resin, no rich payload of cannabinoids. No *sin semilla*, in other words, nothing remotely like it, in any phase of hemp cultivation. Cultivation, then, is the defining difference between marijuana and hemp, but it isn't the only difference.

There are also environmental components. It takes plenty of heat and sunshine, with a particular timing, to produce good marijuana. Until the invention of grow lights, it was almost impossible to grow marijuana in a high-latitude climate like that of Europe. Hemp, yes, all you want. Marijuana, no. That's because the cannabis plant only starts to bloom when the hours of light and darkness equalize at the autumnal equinox. A cannabis plant takes five or six weeks to flower fully, and the more hours of sunny days there are during the plant's flowering, the denser and more resinous the buds become and the more cannabinoids they contain. In fact, the resin may be, among other things, a protection against dehydration, a sort of sunscreen for the plant's delicate reproductive organs. That means that a seed planted in India, for example, or anywhere in the tropics, has a much better chance of developing drug potency compared with an *identical seed* planted in a cool, high-latitude climate where it will grow exuberantly on the long summer days but will blossom only minimally when heat and sun dwindle away quickly after the equinox. That is why we associate marijuana with hot climates in the globe's south, while the world's chief hemp growing areas, in contrast, are cooler and more northerly.

Finally, although marijuana and hemp have a common origin, there is a genetic difference between them. Contrasting cultivation has created contrasting strains, mutually exclusive populations, as hemp farmers and marijuana farmers worked in isolation from one another over thousands of years. Always the former selected for tall, strong stems and the latter, for large, resinous buds. The result was a series of strains with genetic endowments distinct enough that they have sometimes been considered separate species. Still, bring them back into geographical proximity with one another, and they cross-pollinate automatically—so much so that, in geographical proximity, they ruin each other by cross-pollinating. For that reason marijuana and hemp do not go together, historically. Europeans and Chinese have grown hemp for many centuries without producing any cannabis drugs, without even realizing, most of the time, that cannabis *could be* a drug.

We have historical snapshots of very separate strains from two famous eighteenth-century botanists. Linnaeus himself described a northern European domestic hemp strain and called it *Cannabis sativa* as part of his new binomial system of scientific nomenclature in the 1750s. A few decades later another European naturalist, Lamarck, described an Indian drug-producing bush with an almost identical leaf, and believing that it was different enough to constitute a separate species, he named it *Cannabis indica*. (A twentieth-century Russian botanist later described and named an uncultivated ancestral Central Asian variety, *Cannabis ruderalis*.)





*Sativa Indica Ruderalis*

There's disagreement, these days, over whether to think of these as distinct species or varieties of a single species, *Cannabis sativa*. Cannabis plants certainly behave as though they are all one species. Why conceptualize as members of different species plants that, under normal conditions, form part of a single sexually reproducing population? Any cannabis plant will pollinate any other. Therefore the

distinctness of the world's varieties of cannabis has always been provisional, defined by cultivation maintained by geographical separation, more historical than inherent. Whatever clear distinctions had existed in the 1700s were blurring by the 1800s, as Chinese varieties of hemp were introduced in the United States and Europe. Today distinctions are blurring further as clandestine growers in the United States and Canada, especially, have crossed *sativa* and *indica* strains to make a profusion of hybrids.

The marijuana that first came to the United States around 1900 may have been a hybrid, too. Its origins are somewhat mysterious. Indeed, it seemed to come out of nowhere. The people who brought it from Mexico called it *marihuana*, with an "h," which was the spelling used in the United States until the 1960s and which remains the Spanish-language form of the word. Ironically, the English-language spelling *marijuana*, with a "j," seems to have been established in the 1960s and afterward by people who, like me, thought the "j" looked more authentically Spanish than the "h." Also, a lot of us have heard the story that the word *marijuana* derives from a woman's name, María Juana, which wasn't true but also seemed to favor the "j" spelling. And as long as we're on trivia, sometimes Mexicans called the stuff *grifo*, which is the probable origin of the "reefer" in *Reefer Madness*.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Marijuana became "the world's most used illegal drug" not because of its Mexican origins but because of what happened to it in the United States. So we'll begin our retrospective journey in the twentieth-century United States, before tracing marijuana use back, in successive chapters, to its ultimate origins in prehistoric Central Asia.



## American Century

Marijuana first appeared in the United States around 1900, a nice round benchmark year. It was the United States newly emerging as a world power because of its victorious 1898 war against Spain, a United States in temporary possession of Cuba and the Philippines, which it had taken from Spain in the war. Internally, this was the eve of the Progressive Era, when confidence in enlightened government action ran high. A “drug-free society,” though not a turn-of-the-century term, was one of the era’s important goals. The decades-long struggle to eliminate the scourge of alcohol had already triumphed in many state legislatures and was gaining momentum nationally.

Progressives feared the effects of rapid immigration, urbanization, and industrialization that had transformed the United States since the end of its Civil War in 1865. It was a time of labor unrest, and many progressives, who were overwhelmingly white, educated, middle-class, and native-born, felt threatened by the burgeoning population of working-class immigrants and by the formerly enslaved population of southern blacks, some of whom were beginning to move north. They wanted to control the drug use of both groups. The timing of marijuana’s arrival in this country with the first appearance of its use by poor black and Mexican migrants was therefore inauspicious, to put it mildly. In progressive eyes, marijuana was a poison, plain and simple.

Many envisioned a titanic global contest among nations, which people of 1900 tended to formulate as a clash of “races.” Most progressives thought of the United States as a racially “Anglo-Saxon” nation currently taking up the “white man’s burden” of benevolent world domination (“spreading the benefits of civilization”) from a declining Great Britain. Sea power was then the defining military element in geopolitics, and the U.S. military thinking called for U.S. coaling stations in Latin America and Asia, an expanded U.S. Navy, and a Panama Canal to allow quick passage between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Coastal defense was no longer the navy’s only mission, however. In 1907, Theodore Roosevelt, perhaps the most famous progressive of all, sent a “Great White Fleet” of high sea battleships on a year-long trip around the world “to show the flag.”

All this was closely linked to the idea of U.S. trade expansion into Latin America and Asia. Following the severe depression of the 1890s, the captains of U.S. industry agreed that the United States needed to open new export markets to absorb a glut of industrial production that had surged fivefold between 1870 and 1900. Our expanded “blue water” navy was to protect our roving merchant marine fleet as it carried U.S. manufactures around the world. Our acquisition of a naval base on the island of Cuba (Guantánamo Bay) and of Manila’s coveted deep-water harbor at the doorstep of China (ah, the fabled Chinese market!) must be understood in this context. And so must the arrival of marijuana as yet another debilitating “vice,” a “narcotic” from beyond our shores, eating away at the country’s moral fiber . . .

Progressive crusading mentalities shared, as a central tenet, the belief that government action could improve society. Many progressives defined “better” through reference to their Protestant faith. “W

stand at Armageddon and we battle for the Lord,” intoned Theodore Roosevelt when he became the Progressive Party candidate for president in 1912, and his followers marched around the convention hall singing “Onward Christian Soldiers.” Reformers spoke of a “Social Gospel” and of achieving the “Kingdom of God on Earth.” Poisonous drugs had no place in this vision of a society perfected through idealistic legislation and zealous enforcement. As leading arbiters of moral conscience in the Temperance movement, women had a leading role to play in purifying U.S. society of the most ancient and destructive poison of them all, alcohol. Our great 1919–1933 experiment, Prohibition, was, among other things, quite progressive.

Marijuana was a *minor* poison, by comparison with alcohol, in the eyes of progressive proponents of a drug-free society. The second most important drug historically and in the concern of U.S. progressives was opium, smoked around 1900 by Chinese immigrants and injected by millions of whites as morphine and heroin. Opium was followed, on the alarm scale, by a lesser and much more recent pharmaceutical menace, cocaine, present (like opiates) in many patent medicines, and often associated in the U.S. press with young black men. The most pervasive poisons were those adulterated foods and medicines, impurities denounced by “muckraking” national magazines and journalists. The 1906 Pure Food and Drug Act is a landmark expression of official concern for the toxic environment. The 1914 Harrison Act, the basis for U.S. drug law for many decades, made opiates and cocaine controlled substances, available only by medical prescription. The Eighteenth Amendment and the Volstead Act finished the job, so to speak, by getting alcohol off the streets nationally.

U.S. progressives also projected their reformist impulse internationally, with big implications for the global history of marijuana. People in the U.S.-occupied Philippine Islands consumed large quantities of opium, and because these people were ostensibly being improved and groomed for self-government (the official explanation for our occupation), U.S. authorities extended their anti-poison crusade to colonial Asia, in which they gained the enthusiastic support of Christian missionaries. The U.S. crusade stood in marked contrast to the British example of allowing (when not actively promoting) the Asian opium trade. Zealous U.S. diplomats persevered in a series of international conferences beginning in the 1909 Shanghai Conference specifically on opium, continuing through the 1920s, and culminating eventually in the UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961, which extended the current regime of drug control around the world.

Where was marijuana in all of this? The twentieth-century U.S. prohibition of marijuana sprang from an idealist impulse, as well as from religious feeling and a tad of bigotry—but good intentions went awry. Observe.

## THE EARLY YEARS

Limited but clear evidence shows that people in the United States first began to smoke marijuana cigarettes on the eve of World War I. These pioneers were laborers recruited in Mexico during the early 1900s to mine ore, maintain railroad tracks, and harvest crops in the western United States. Other migrants soon followed on their own initiative, seeking work. When Mexico’s great revolution of 1910 began, the northern part of the country was a major battlefield, dominated by the revolutionary general Pancho Villa. “La Cucaracha,” the song famously sung by Villa’s followers, refers to marijuana in its lyrics. Ten years of fighting probably encouraged use of marijuana in militarized Mexico, where it was regarded as a soldier’s vice. Meanwhile, noncombatants fled across the border to escape the fighting, often staying with relatives in the United States until it was safe

return home.

The first piece of major historical evidence concerning use of the new drug on this side of the border is an investigation conducted for the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 1917. The investigator reported that marijuana was common in south and west Texas, whether homegrown, brought from Mexico by several companies, or purchased in one-ounce packages from pharmacies and grocery stores, some of which even advertised and sold by mail order. As migrating workers moved north and west from Texas toward the cotton fields and citrus groves of California, into the mining camps of the Rocky Mountain states, and, eventually, into the industrializing cities of the upper Midwest, they took marijuana with them.

It is hard to know what marijuana signified in their lives. Unquestionably, though, its low cost constituted a powerful attraction. Marijuana is naturally an inexpensive crop to grow, store, and transport. A migrant laborer might spend in an afternoon drinking beer money enough to buy marijuana for a month. Only illegality would make marijuana expensive, and it was not yet illegal in the United States. U.S. society as a whole had never heard of marijuana in the 1910s, but Mexican (and Mexican American) society frowned on the drug. They more than frowned. They even endorsed the “reefer madness” image, whereby a few puffs of marijuana could turn anyone at all into a homicidal maniac. The men who actually smoked it obviously knew better, yet social disapproval led them to keep their marijuana out of sight. I say “men” because there are few reports of women smoking it, with the regular exception of prostitutes. We have no good account of marijuana from the first generation of smokers themselves. Middle-class Mexicans and Mexican Americans called them *marihuanos*, a strongly uncomplimentary term. The state’s English-speaking power structure took notice of marijuana only when a fight brought in the police. Such a fight in El Paso, Texas, evidently led, in 1914, to the first municipal ban on marijuana smoking in the United States.

The immigrants often lived isolated in mining camps, railroad boxcars, or the rude housing provided for agricultural migrant laborers. Mainstream white society regarded them with virulent racism. Even when, in the 1920s, they began to find work in cities like Chicago, differences of language, class, and culture limited the social contacts of Mexican migrants. No wonder few whites learned to smoke marijuana from them. Yet someone clearly did learn. The basic U.S. marijuana-smoking customs of the 1960s, such as passing around one cigarette, moistening it with saliva before lighting it, and saving the unsmoked butt to recycle its contents, were unquestionably introduced from Mexico.

Among non-Spanish speakers, those most likely to find themselves working alongside Mexican immigrants in the 1910s and 1920s were black laborers likewise attracted by marijuana’s low cost. Marijuana appeared by 1920 among the black working class in New Orleans, a city in close merchant shipping contact with Mexico. During the first half of the twentieth century, Mexican marijuana represented the great bulk of what was consumed in the United States, and the consumers were brown or black, generally young and male, too.

Among the blacks were a few hundred musicians who transformed U.S. popular culture in the 1920s and it is no exaggeration to say that marijuana was part of the process. Jazz music, as it was eventually called, had been created by black musicians in New Orleans at the turn of the century. Before the 1920s, the only way to hear jazz was to go to the poor black dance halls of New Orleans or, famously, its red light districts. Some jazz playing could be heard on Mississippi riverboats that operated upriver, as well. Then came the great migration of southern blacks to the industrial cities of the Midwest and Northeast. New Orleans jazz could then be heard on the South Side of Chicago. Adventurous white working-class young people began to pay attention. New Orleans jazzmen who had moved north to Chicago in the 1920s moved east to New York City in the 1930s. Radio broadcast

stations springing up across the country and phonograph discs with one song on each side took jazz to the masses. Jazz was becoming the national sound track, and beyond that, an international sensation of global modernity.

Early jazz music, condemned as lascivious, even infernal, by the older generation, had clear affiliations with youth rebellion. Early jazz was dance music, above all, and U.S. young people succumbed to a notable dance craze in the 1920s. “Modern girls” of the 1920s, dance-floor “flappers” wore their hair short and their skirts high. They might even smoke tobacco and drink illegal liquor, which wasn’t hard to find. Alcohol, not marijuana, was the principal intoxicant of the “Jazz Age,” perhaps ironically, given that the music’s unstoppable rise in popularity coincided with national Prohibition, from 1919 to 1933. Smoking tobacco taught this generation to inhale. Many of the musicians themselves preferred to inhale marijuana, which they most commonly called *reefer*, for reasons that you now understand. Jazz players smoked in and around their performance venues, and often during their practice sessions. A few songs even mention reefer in the title. Whether or not reefer made them play better—they thought so—it made them enjoy playing more. For jazz players, to smoke reefer was to belong to a kind of secret brotherhood. Sometimes they used their elaborate slang, called “jive,” to mention reefer (as “muggles,” “tea,” etc.) onstage, or even on recordings, and an inside joke for other “vipers,” as they called themselves. Being a viper was part of the jazz player’s mystique.

Jazz involved a sort of improvisation and rhythmic “swing” that could not be written down. And never, in the 1920s, could white and black musicians play in the same band, which would have been a sickening outrage according to the dominant racist sensibilities of the day. At first, the only way for whites to learn jazz was to seek out black jazz players, watch them perform night after night, make friends with them, and get some pointers. Eventually, most whites who learned to play jazz did so by wearing out the records of the New Orleans musicians who had created the style, lifting the phonograph needle over and over to repeat a particular passage. Whether in direct association with black jazzmen or by a more remote method, white musicians learned jazz by imitating black musicians. For some, that imitation included reefer.

The association between jazz and marijuana can be exemplified by the most influential trumpet player in global history, Louis Armstrong. Armstrong grew up in the roughest parts of New Orleans and started playing his horn in an institution that was a cross between an orphanage and a reform school. (He was sent there for firing a pistol into the air on the street, a typical expression of high spirits in his neighborhood.) Within a few years, he was part of the first wave of New Orleans musicians to make the move north to Chicago, and in the 1920s his recordings became widely copied models that defined the new musical genre. Armstrong was a lifelong viper who liked his band to practice “high” and who, later in life, after the national ban on marijuana, wrote a letter of protest to President Dwight Eisenhower. By that time, the Federal Bureau of Narcotics kept a file on Armstrong and on many other jazz players.

### **THE MARIHUANA TAX ACT, 1937**

Marijuana was only one of several psychoactive substances legally restricted in the early-twentieth-century United States, as we have seen. When the derivatives of opium poppies and coca leaves became controlled substances in 1915, however, marijuana did not. Unlike cocaine and, especially, opiates, the presence of this new poison was incipient, limited, and localized—not yet a national concern. The most abused substance of the early-twentieth-century United States, meanwhile, was

unquestionably booze.

Whiskey and hard cider had been omnipresent on the nineteenth-century frontier. Opposition to alcohol use had ebbed and flowed during that century, and many states had banned the sale of the drug well before national Prohibition. Historians agree that, in addition to concerns about the dangers of alcoholism, fears of immigrant drinking figured importantly in the national mood. These were the same years, after all, in which immigration was first restricted by congressional action.

Before national prohibition, a lot of drinking happened in the sort of uproarious saloon familiar to modern viewers from cinematic Westerns. In the industrial north of the United States and in the Midwest, hard-drinking European immigrants frequented saloons, which were also centers of political indoctrination and organizing. This was a period in which European immigrants were suspected of radical doctrines, such as Socialism and Anarchism. More often, the political life of saloons turned on the exchange of votes for benefits, namely, patronage, what these days we call “pork-barrel politics.” Saloons seemed a big problem to progressive reformers of the early 1900s. Moreover, whether in Dodge City, Chicago, or Brooklyn, saloons were a man’s world, venues in which the only women were prostitutes. The famous activist Carrie Nation believed that she obeyed a higher moral order when she smashed up saloons with an ax. The Women’s Christian Temperance Union was an organization of primary importance in building a national consensus for the prohibition of alcohol. In general, the institution of Prohibition in 1919 coincided with, and partly resulted from, a rise in women’s political engagement, including a woman’s right to vote, and protection of children ranked high among women’s goals.

However, the Eighteenth Amendment, outlawing the manufacture, transport, and sale of alcoholic beverages, is the only constitutional amendment ever to be repealed. National prohibition of alcohol soon began to lose popularity because of its mortifying side effects. The saloons disappeared, and consumption of the drug declined by half, but millions of Americans continued to drink. Only the commercialization of alcohol, not its consumption, had been criminalized. The illegal manufacture, transport, and sale of alcohol became a multimillion-dollar business that energized criminals and created a wave of gang violence. The rise of the modern mafia confounded reformers who had promised that controlling drugs would reduce crime. Drinking clubs called “speakeasies” multiplied in place of saloons. Unlike saloons, speakeasies were full of jazz and women who weren’t prostitutes. Full of gangsters, too, who became jazz connoisseurs and hired many musicians for their late-night carousing. Typically, when the police raided a speakeasy for selling alcohol, they did not arrest the clientele for drinking, which was not illegal per se. Still, people agreed that Prohibition had brought widespread disregard for the law. The moral arguments against alcohol had not changed, but gradually, during the 1930s, our sense of priorities and possibilities had. As the country scraped into the depths of the Great Depression in 1933, it abandoned its “noble experiment” in moral improvement.

Compared to all this, marijuana was hardly an issue in 1933. Most people in the United States did not know what it was. True, its use seems to have risen during the prohibition of alcohol, but mostly among poor black and brown people whose concerns rated little national attention. Still, local lawmakers noticed and reacted. By 1930, marijuana had been prohibited by law in many states, beginning in Texas, California, and other western areas with significant populations of Mexican descent. The creation of state and local laws in the 1920s had elicited very little debate, perhaps none at all. Such laws were advanced as simple matters of public order: “Loco weed,” known to drive Mexicans violently and permanently crazy after three puffs, had been outlawed as a public safety measure, end of story. The United States as a whole read the word *marihuana* for the first time

exaggerated newspaper reports that were, in some ways, exceedingly reminiscent of the early “temperance noir” stories about violent crimes committed under the influence of “demon rum.” Another area of early alarm and prohibition was Louisiana, where the New Orleans commissioner of public safety began a campaign that garnered some national attention. The trouble seems to have started there when a young musician tried to forge a doctor’s signature on a prescription for marijuana, which was available in the city for medical use.



Reefer Madness, 1936.

More or less at that point, a veteran Prohibition-enforcement agent named Harry Anslinger was appointed head of the newly created National Bureau of Narcotics (FBN). Anslinger was as committed a moral reformer as one could desire. He believed that use of marijuana was wrong and very dangerous. He disliked the black and brown people who used it, and he believed that they were dangerous, too. From the time he became the country’s leading narcotics law enforcement officer in 1930, Anslinger worked to raise public awareness of the marijuana menace through systematic publicity. The powerful Hearst newspaper chain, with its strong anti-Mexican attitude, was his staunch



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