

New Nixon Tapes Reveal Lies Behind Cannabis Criminalization

The campaign to criminalize marijuana has long been built on myths, stereotypes, and deliberate misinformation. Since its inception over a century ago, marijuana prohibition has not been rooted in scientific evidence or public health concerns, but rather in political agendas, xenophobia, and sensationalist media narratives. Recent revelations, such as audio recordings of President Richard Nixon, have exposed the hypocrisy behind cannabis criminalization, further proving that the fight against marijuana was never about the plant itself.

States That Legalized Marijuana See Massive Reduction in Tobacco Use

The early push for cannabis prohibition had little to do with concerns for public health or safety. Instead, the drive to criminalize marijuana was largely based on fear-mongering and racism. From the beginning, media outlets perpetuated bizarre and exaggerated claims about the dangers of marijuana use. For instance, a 1927 New York Times article titled “*Mexican Family Goes Insane*” blamed the consumption of the marihuana plant for the family’s insanity, despite no scientific evidence to support the claim.

These sensationalist stories, which stoked fear of immigrants and minorities, played a significant role in building public support for marijuana prohibition. Similarly, a 1933 academic paper published in *The Journal of Law and Criminology* falsely claimed that marijuana use inevitably led to insanity and death—allegations that were baseless but widely accepted.

Racist Roots of Marijuana Prohibition

In 1937, the U.S. government officially banned cannabis under the Marihuana Tax Act, largely due to the efforts of Harry J. Anslinger, America’s first “drug czar.” Anslinger’s crusade against marijuana was fueled by openly racist rhetoric. He falsely claimed that marijuana use was widespread among Black Americans, Hispanics, and entertainers and that it contributed to moral decay. He infamously stated, “This marijuana causes white women to seek sexual relations with Negroes, entertainers, and any others,” further stoking fear and reinforcing racial stereotypes.

This kind of rhetoric, repeated frequently by Anslinger and his supporters, succeeded in turning public opinion against marijuana. The ban on cannabis was based not on science but on racism and xenophobia, a fact often ignored in the broader discussion of drug policy in America.

Nixon’s War on Drugs: Public Enemy Number One

By the time Richard Nixon declared drug abuse to be “public enemy number one” in 1971, marijuana had already been classified as a Schedule I controlled substance—alongside heroin—under the Controlled Substances Act. Despite the harsh legal stance against cannabis, Nixon himself privately acknowledged that marijuana was not as dangerous as the government portrayed it to be. In newly surfaced audio tapes, Nixon

can be heard describing the penalties for marijuana possession as “ridiculous” and stating that cannabis was not “particularly dangerous.”

Nevertheless, the Nixon administration publicly doubled down on cannabis enforcement for political gain. As John Ehrlichman, Nixon’s domestic policy chief, later revealed, the administration used drug laws as a tool to target and disrupt communities of color and anti-Vietnam War protesters. “We knew we were lying about the drugs,” Ehrlichman admitted, but the political benefits of criminalizing cannabis were too valuable to pass up.

The Continued Consequences of Marijuana Prohibition

Fifty years later, marijuana remains [a Schedule I drug under federal law](#), and politicians continue to repeat many of the same falsehoods about cannabis that were used to justify its initial prohibition. Despite this, the tide of public opinion has shifted dramatically. According to a 2023 Gallup poll, 70% of U.S. adults believe marijuana should be legal—a significant increase from the 51% support recorded in 2014, the year Colorado and Washington became the first states to legalize adult-use cannabis.

Today, 24 states have legalized marijuana for recreational use, and no state has repealed its legalization laws. Public support for marijuana legalization has steadily grown, and both major political parties have recognized the need to end the practice of arresting and imprisoning marijuana consumers.

The Time to End Marijuana Prohibition Is Now

The history of marijuana prohibition is a history of fraud. From the early racist campaigns of the 1930s to the politically motivated War on Drugs of the 1970s, cannabis prohibition has never been about protecting public health. Instead, it has been used as a tool to target marginalized communities, stifle dissent, and promote fear. With the majority of Americans now supporting legalization and both presidential candidates calling for an end to criminal penalties for marijuana use, the end of marijuana prohibition seems inevitable.

As we move forward, it’s essential to acknowledge the harm caused by decades of marijuana criminalization and work to repair the damage. Legalizing marijuana is a crucial step in dismantling the fraudulent system of prohibition that has persisted for far too long. It’s time to finally put an end to the lies and misinformation that have kept marijuana illegal for more than a century.

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