

McCaffrey blasts drug legalization referenda

At a press conference at the White House on Dec. 30, Gen. Barry McCaffrey, National Drug Control Policy Director, was joined by Attorney General Janet Reno and Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala, to deliver the Clinton administration's response to the recently passed initiatives in California and Arizona which legalized the use of illegal drugs for so-called medical purposes. Following are excerpts of the press conference.

McCaffrey: First of all, we're going to send a clear message to all federal employees, to all federal contractors, to all organizations receiving federal funds, and to all employees who work with the safety of the American public, that Schedule I drugs are against the law and won't be tolerated. . . .

The second major principle we espouse is one of education. Perhaps one of the few good things that may come out of all of this is to reassert the requirement to explain to young people, to this new generation, and indeed to the parents who are caring for them, the dangers of drug abuse in America. And, so, it's fundamentally going to be based on us consulting with medical organizations, and with coalitions across America, to underscore the dangers implicit in Schedule I drugs.

The third point I would underscore, is the federal government's responsibility as a public trust to ensure that safe and effective medicines are provided the American people. It's a very special responsibility. It's been done with brilliance by the National Institutes of Health, the Food and Drug Administration, the DEA. It's prevented thalidomide and laetrile and other nonsense substances from going in front of the American people. . . .

And then, finally, and I'll let the Attorney General deal with this, we would underscore that federal law enforcement provisions remain in effect. Nothing has changed. Federal law is unaffected by these propositions.

Let me remind the American people this is not a hopeless cause. Drug abuse in America has decreased in the last 15 years. Essentially, it's been cut by half, some 50%. The use of cocaine is down by 75%. . . .

Having said that, here's a problem. And I isolated one statistic. . . . This is drug abuse by eighth graders, and I start in '91, although arguably it was 1989 when the values started to change. But, between the base year of '91 through '96,

we're seeing 30-day drug use by eighth graders almost triple. It's just outrageous. And I picked eighth graders, because they're at the front end of the most vulnerable period of adolescent development, whether it's their central nervous system, their educational objectives, or their role in a family. So this is the danger.

And we go on to talk about "gateway behavior" by adolescents, in which we know that there are enormous statistics of risk correlation between the abuse of these illegal drugs and later addictive problems in life. That's what we're worried about, and that's the terrible message in this quasi-legalization of drugs that we assert Proposition 200, 215 represents.

Here's what we're worried about. This is a not a medical proposition. This is the legalization of drugs that we're concerned about. Here's what the medical adviser in the state of California saw as the potential uses of marijuana. And, you know, it includes recalling forgotten memories, cough suppressant, Parkinson's disease, writer's cramp. It simply does not include a doctor's diagnosis, a medical prescription. This is not medicine. This is a Cheech and Chong show. . . .

We call these hoax initiatives, stealth initiatives—that you simply couldn't, as an intelligent person, read the ballot initiative—in Arizona, in particular, but, neither state—and get the notion that you weren't talking about compassionate care of the terminally ill, you were talking writer's cramp and the quasi-legalization of drugs. . . .

Q: General McCaffrey, you were talking about the people of Arizona and California [inaudible]. But Arizona passed 65-35, by quite a substantial margin.

McCaffrey: We don't think there was an adequate case made for this proposition. And I will refer your attention to the ballot initiative as it was worded. There was \$2 million worth of outside-of-California money, by five people, that arguably pushed this through. . . .

Q: But, General, you're basically saying that no matter what the people of Arizona and California said, the federal law has prevailed here and continues to prevail. Is that it?

McCaffrey: Clearly, the only thing that's not under debate, is whether federal law is still operative. It's unaffected by these proposals.

Re: . . . Despite these initiatives, we want to make clear that federal law still applies and federal officials will continue to apply the law as it has always done, on a case-by-case basis. U.S. Attorneys in both states will continue to review cases for prosecution, and DEA officials will review cases as they have, to determine whether to revoke the registration of any physician who recommends or prescribes so-called Schedule I controlled substances. We will not turn a blind eye toward our responsibility to enforce federal law and to preserve the integrity of the medical and scientific process, to determine if drugs have medical value before allowing them to be used.