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Time to again mobilize against marijuana

Backers of marijuana legalization are not dissuaded by the November defeat of California Proposition 19. Expect them to regroup for 2012. Those who oppose legalization must also mobilize, led by Obama and his administration.

By the Monitor's Editorial Board

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A pleasant surprise from last month's elections was a big "no" vote in California on a ballot measure that would have created the first jurisdiction in the world to fully legalize marijuana.

The state most identified with "recreational" drugs sent a strong signal to all the nation's politicians that – maybe, just maybe – pot isn't heading toward social, and ultimately legal, acceptance.

Ah, if it were that simple.

The pro-pot lobby isn't taking "no" for an answer. The legal buying and selling of marijuana, like alcohol or tobacco, is only a matter of when, not if, say backers.

And, indeed, even though the California vote was 54 percent to 46 percent, subsequent polling showed the no vote may not reflect a solid rejection.

If the pro group can write a tighter law, and if supporters can get out the youth vote (far more likely in a presidential election year), they may well succeed in 2012 – in California, Colorado, or other states.

But not if opponents of pot legalization can mobilize now. (For a Monitor editorial arguing against legalization, click [here](#).)

Needed: One voice, one message

What is needed is a dominant voice with a convincing, simple message to act as a counterweight to a legalization lobby that is run by a handful of savvy, persistent, and well-coordinated organizations and donors.

Who might take on that job?

President Obama, as a father and political leader, must use the bully pulpit for this issue. His administration must act preemptively and be explicit about federal action against any state that moves to make pot legal. It should not wait to reveal its plan of attack until a state referendum finally passes or a legislature succumbs.

The Feds have the reach. They have the funds. They have the law. If only they had the political will.

In this administration, the antilegalization fight has been left largely to Mr. Obama's "drug czar," Gil Kerlikowske. He's done a credible job, and his office is now wisely considering a strategy to counter Round 2 in the legalization drive. But where is the rest of the administration?

It took private and public prodding from former chiefs of the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) to jolt Attorney General Eric Holder from silence on the California ballot measure, Proposition 19.

The initiative was in “direct conflict” with federal law that makes production and sale of marijuana a federal crime, the DEA administrators pointed out. And the measure, if passed, would violate the Constitution’s Supremacy Clause, where federal law trumps state law.

A hesitant Justice Department

With the crucial California election less than three weeks away, Mr. Holder responded to the former chiefs. He stated that the Department of Justice opposes Prop. 19, would enforce the law, and said the department was “considering all available legal and policy options.”

It was a belated warning that left exact consequences unsaid. Those plans still haven’t been revealed, and should be. But Holder’s warning was enough of a caution that California voters began to wonder whether their state might lose federal contracts and dollars.

Holder is not the only hesitant administration official in the antilegalization drive. Where is Vice President Joe Biden? As a senator, he took the lead in creating the drug-czar office. Obama, too, has shrunk from the issue, laughing it off at a town-hall meeting in 2009, then adding a one-liner that legalizing marijuana is not a good strategy to grow the economy.

The kind interpretation of this tepidity is that the White House has more important matters to handle. But politics is surely at play. Do Democrats not want to alienate youthful voters who are also pot enthusiasts? And the president’s own past pot use in his youth – he wrote about it in his autobiography – could make the issue problematic for him.

Despite dangers, public acceptance of pot

Marijuana has been gaining popular acceptance, led by a state-by-state drive to legalize “medical marijuana.” Voters in 15 states plus Washington, D.C., have deemed a drug that contains carcinogens, is inhaled, and is neither regulated nor approved by the Food and Drug Administration, to be medicine.

And if it’s medicine, that means it’s not harmful, right?

No. Studies are mounting that show marijuana’s harmful effects, especially on youths whose brains are not fully developed. The average potency of today’s marijuana is more than twice what it was in 1998. Use can lead to dependency, distort perception, and impair coordination, learning, and memory. Chronic use has been linked to suicidal thoughts and schizophrenia.

Now, 46 percent of Americans favor legalizing marijuana – 58 percent in the West, according to Gallup. Fewer youths see it as risky, and use among teens again increased this year – continuing the reverse of a decade of decline, according to the Monitoring the Future Study. When asked about use in the past month, more 12th-graders used pot than cigarettes, according to the 2010 study.

In 1979, the country also seemed on the verge of legalization. But the tide turned. The crack epidemic of the ’80s played a role, but so did first lady Nancy Reagan’s “just say no” campaign. It was a simple message, by a prominent person.

Research by the independent group RAND Corp. puts the lie to today’s arguments that legalizing marijuana is a sure-bet revenue raiser and will drive violent Mexican drug cartels out of business. But the main message must be that marijuana is not a benign drug. And who better to make this case than the president himself?

Obama as antipot spokesperson

Barack Obama is widely respected as a family man. His two girls are on the way to teenhood. One in 6 people who start using marijuana as an adolescent becomes addicted. Is he going to simply tell his daughters that, yes, he smoked pot and, well, he hopes they survive the experience if they follow his example?

Or will the president successfully articulate a message – one that helps parents and other caring adults talk to today's youth – by telling his children that rejecting marijuana isn't about his past use, it's about their future. It's about their safety, their clarity of thought, their happiness independent of a drug.

The culture of pot acceptance must be reversed in America. It was turned back after 1979, and that can happen again. But the drug czar can't do it alone. We need the man at the top, and all of the relevant administration players, saying the same thing, and saying it often. What's good for the president's children is good for the country. He must tell us so.

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