

HIGH TIMES

Why Donald Trump's Drug Czar is Very Bad

Chris Roberts

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Donald Trump is president at a crucial time in American history (not just because for us Americans living today, it's our American present). The country's attitudes on drugs are changing more dramatically and more quickly than at any time over the past 50 years—and at the same time, drug overdoses are claiming more lives more quickly than at *any* time in our history.

Times like these call for vision, clarity and action. So to whom is Trump turning to steer the country through the opiate crisis and to grapple with the glaring incongruity between federal and state policies on medical cannabis and marijuana legalization—at a time when there is overwhelming consensus from the American public that the current policy is hot garbage?

A gang of neo-Reaganite drug warriors.

This would be the nicest possible way to refer to Attorney General Jeff Sessions. The appellation certainly applies to Tom Marino, a Republican congressman from Pennsylvania and Trump's nomination to become the next director of the Office on National Drug Control Policy, as CBS News first reported earlier this month.

Commonly known as the drug czar, the head of the ONDCP isn't as powerful or influential as the attorney general. The ONDCP does oversee federally funded drug-war propaganda—much of the PSAs you've seen over the past 20 years were funded by the ONDCP—and also oversees the multi-jurisdictional “High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas” across the country.

But, since Donald Trump appears to be content to delegate the shaping of policy to whomever happens to be at hand, it's safe to assume Marino—like Sessions, an early Trump supporter whose loyalty through thick, thin and boasts of grabbing women's private parts was rewarded with a plum post—will wield significant influence over the marijuana industry. And it's also safe to assume his influence will be “terrible,” [Oregon marijuana attorney Vince Sliwoski wrote in his *Portland Mercury* column.](#)

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Marino has yet to be confirmed, and for now still holds onto his seat in the House—where he racked up a near-perfect anti-marijuana voting record. Marino voted against the Rohrabacher-Farr amendment, the bipartisan addition to the spending bill that keeps the Justice Department away from state-legal medical marijuana. (For context: torture-supporting MAGA hat-wearers whose fans like to sign public statements with #TCOT are in support of this bill.) He also voted

against allowing veterans to talk—*talk*—about medical marijuana with their VA doctors and has voted against expanded access to CBD.

Marino got to where he is thanks to significant help from Big Pharma.

Pharmaceutical and health products companies were Marino's biggest single sole donator of cash, according to campaign finance records crunched by OpenSecrets. As the *Mercury* points out, Marino is on record saying that he supports marijuana, but only if it's in pill form—in other words, only if the sole source for cannabis in America is the pharmaceutical industry.

As the Drug Policy Alliance pointed out shortly after Marino's nomination went public, Marino has called for imprisoning marijuana users—*users*—and has been a total cheerleader for Jeff Sessions's turn towards a hard-line, punitive form of justice in America, at a time when nobody—not voters, not policy experts and not even a majority of Congress members—has an appetite for such a thing.

“There are few hard-core supporters of the failed War on Drugs left, but those that are left seem to all be getting jobs in the administration,” said Bill Piper, DPA senior director for national affairs.

How bad is Marino? Even the Cato Institute, the libertarian think tank funded by the Koch brothers—yes, those Koch brothers—thinks his nomination is a move in the wrong direction.

Like Jeff Sessions, Marino is a former federal prosecutor. Compare his background to the prior two drug czars: Michael Botticelli, a recovering alcoholic who achieved professional success as a public-health expert and is credited with leading Americans to believe, correctly, that drug addiction is a health problem rather than a criminal offense to be punished; and Gil Kerlikowske, the former chief of police of Seattle, Washington. Prosecutors' jobs is to put people in prison; health experts heal, and cops are supposed to maintain peace.

(Not that Kerlikowske was a gem: in a 2010 interview with *the Nation*, he called Nancy Reagan's “Just Say No” campaign a smashing success, and was a leading voice in opposition to California's Prop. 19, which would have legalized recreational marijuana that same year.)

There is also reason to assume that Marino will be an accomplice in Trump administration crackdown schemes against sanctuary cities, some of which—Denver, Los Angeles and San Francisco, just to name a few—are also centers of legal cannabis commerce.

Democrats from all corners should oppose him—as should the Trump Republicans who are pushing marijuana reform, if they're serious about any progress at all on the issue in the next for years.