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Barry McCaffrey Says He Is '100 Percent' for Medical Marijuana

Jacob Sullum | October 23, 2009

"If we were talking about medical use of marijuana, THC, or cannabinoids," Clinton administration drug czar Barry McCaffrey said on CNN last night, "I'd be 100 percent for it." For anyone familiar with McCaffrey's history, this opening whopper made it hard to pay attention to anything else he had to say. Here is McCaffrey in August 1996 on the subject of medical marijuana:

There is not a shred of scientific evidence that shows that smoked marijuana is useful or needed. This is not medicine. This is a cruel hoax that sounds more like something out of a Cheech and Chong show.

At a December 1996 press conference, McCaffrey was asked whether there was "any evidence...that marijuana is useful in a medical situation." His reply was unequivocal: "No, none at all."

While research since then has added to our knowledge of marijuana's medicinal properties, there was plenty of evidence at the time McCaffrey made these dismissive remarks that the plant is medically useful, especially in fighting nausea and restoring appetite but also in treating various kinds of pain. You might conclude that McCaffrey just didn't know what he was talking about then and has since read up on the subject, except that he is still playing the same games.

Although he's "100 percent for" the medical use of marijuana, McCaffrey told Lou Dobbs it isn't necessary to let patients use the plant because they already have access to the prescription drug Marinol, an FDA-approved capsule containing a synthetic version of THC, marijuana's main active ingredient. (Marinol also was around back in 1996, and the double-blind clinical trials necessary to get it approved conclusively showed that McCaffrey was wrong when he insisted there was no evidence that marijuana is medically effective.) But right after presenting Marinol as a perfect substitute for marijuana, McCaffrey cut it down, saying "it's available for patients" but "not much used" because "it's not a very good drug." In fact, that is an assessment you will often hear from medical marijuana users who have tried Marinol. But if McCaffrey delved into the reasons many patients prefer marijuana to Marinol—e.g., it's easier for people suffering from severe nausea, it takes effect much faster, the dosage is easier to control, and the psychoactive effects are less disturbing—he would be making the case for medical marijuana. Which

he would be totally for if he weren't completely against it.

McCaffrey's stance against medical marijuana went beyond denying the evidence in its favor. As the Cato Institute's Tim Lynch pointed out in the same segment of Dobbs' show, McCaffrey helped spearhead the Clinton administration policy of threatening to prosecute doctors or take away their prescribing privileges simply for discussing marijuana's benefits with their patients. That policy, which in some respects was more extreme than anything the Bush administration later did in this area, was slapped down by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 9th Circuit on First Amendment grounds.

[Thanks to LEAP's Tom Angell for the tip.]