

High Society: the Federal Arena

As US states vie for their right to end their part in the prohibition against marijuana, Congress has initiated a new contest in the federal arena with the introduction of the Compassionate Access, Research Expansion and Respect States Act (CARERS). This act was introduced in the senate on March 10 by senators Rand Paul (R-KY), Cory Booker (D-NJ) and Kristen Gillibrand (D-NY), with the intent to end the federal government's ability to interfere with state medical marijuana programs and research. With 23 states currently implementing such programs, a more sensible approach toward marijuana legislation is very much needed, yet recent history has shown that the federal government would prefer to institute a policy of zero tolerance that better resembles domestic terrorism than it does common sense legislation.

"This bill we are introducing seeks to right decades of wrong and end unnecessary marijuana laws," Booker stated at a capitol news conference before introducing the bill to the senate last week. "Our federal government has long overstepped the boundaries of common sense, fiscal prudence and compassion ..."

Cory Booker's ideology is exactly what the CARERS Act looks to uphold through a slew of substantial changes to federal marijuana laws. Most notable of these changes is the reclassification of marijuana from a Schedule 1 (the most dangerous drugs) to a Schedule 2 drug, which would land cannabis an association with the currently "less dangerous" drugs, such as cocaine, opium, Oxycontin and morphine. Though this reclassification insults our intelligence by posing cannabis as a threat to society, it would be the first federal acknowledgement that cannabis has potential medical benefits. This act is another common sense initiative; there are not only a number of current studies that support claims of medical benefit(see www.crmcr.ucsd.edu), but as of October 2003 the federal government holds a patent on the cannabis plant's medicinal compounds.

Until the prohibition era began in the late 1930s, medicinal cannabis could be found in almost every US homeopathic pharmacy. Early editions of American medical journals recommended hemp products for inflammation, pain relief, nausea and other common ailments. Though there is a plethora of documented case studies, historical accounts and set cultural precedents, the medicinal acceptance of cannabis remains under debate; however, the reclassification of marijuana from a Schedule 1 to a Schedule 2 drug would ease restrictions on the research that will help realize the full potential of this miracle plant.

Other aspects of Senate Bill S. 683 more or less follow suit with the basis of rescheduling marijuana as a less threatening drug, but focus more on the details of how to implement a new "less aggressive" marijuana policy. For example, under this new legislation, states would be able to decide whether to participate in medicinal marijuana programs based on their own perceived merits and without the fear of federal prosecution of legislators, doctors, businesses or individuals who participate in such programs. The CARERS Act will also allow banking institutes to expand banking access to businesses that participate in the medicinal marijuana industry, which currently operate on a "cash only" basis, by eliminating the fear of prosecution as money launderers for an illegally traded substance. Easier access to medicine for treatment of military veterans and a complete declassification of "low THC" strains of cannabis are other potential benefits of this new bill that will open up a number of other medical and industrial opportunities.

Ultimately, what the CARERS Act means to the legalization effort is that the federal government will be forced to recognize that marijuana prohibition has been founded on the basis of inaccurate and misleading information. Some would even venture to call these “lies.” Though this is not full blown legalization, the CARERS Act is a step in the right direction toward ending the negative stigma associated with cannabis use. Hopefully, such legislation will encourage those individuals who seek to bring similar initiatives concerning the cannabis plant to come forward without fear of persecution by their peers, so that we can finally put an end to this perpetual war on weed.