

[Kuzmarov on Dufton, 'Grass Roots: The Rise and Fall and Rise of Marijuana in America'](#)

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Emily Dufton. *Grass Roots: The Rise and Fall and Rise of Marijuana in America*. New York: Basic Books, 2017. 320 pp. \$28.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-465-09616-9.

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A Pot History Primer

In November 2016, Americans elected a president who both vowed to revitalize the War on Drugs and approved medical and recreational marijuana use or limited growing rights in eight different states, including some that went for the candidate. A Gallup Poll found that the number of Americans who supported legalization has reached 60 percent—the highest in the nation’s history. Emily Dufton, in her book *Grass Roots: The Rise and Fall and Rise of Marijuana in America*, cautions pro-legalization activists not to become too complacent as popular opinion could shift if there is the perception that too many kids are taking up marijuana smoking or if the industry falls under monopolies that spread false advertising. Pro-marijuana activists achieved numerous legislative victories, she points out, in the mid-1970s when the drug had become socially accepted; however, these gains proved to be pyrrhic because of the emergence of parent activists alarmed by the celebration of the drug in popular culture and its frequent use by teenagers and preteens.

Dufton’s book provides a welcome addition to marijuana history in its emphasis on the importance of grassroots activists in shaping the trajectory of state and federal marijuana policy and in showing the rapid shifts in public opinion that have accompanied the rise and decline of pro- and anti-marijuana activism. Marijuana has inspired such passion and commitment in part because of its emergence in the 1960s as a symbol of countercultural rebellion. The drug had been subjected to harsh penalties beginning in the 1930s when Harry J. Anslinger, the director of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (FBN), had sought to link the “devil weed” to “murder, suicides, robberies, criminal assaults and deeds of maniacal insanity” (p. 4). The first pro-marijuana activist, Lowell Eggemeier, helped to inspire the birth of the legalization movement by walking into San Francisco’s City Hall in August 1964, lighting up a joint and asking to be arrested. His attorney, James R. White III, held a rally to announce the formation of LEMAR (a contraction of LEqualize MARijuana), an organization supported by beatnik poet Allen Ginsberg, who was photographed in a famous portrait holding a sign that read: “POT IS FUN” (p. 17).

Proponents of legalization have long maintained that the history of marijuana suppression has been founded almost entirely on prejudice and that the drug could create positive beneficial states of mind. In the early 1970s, countercultural activists Keith Stroup and Blair Newman formed the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws (NORML), which garnered significant success in

lobbying legislators and educating the public on the need for drug policy reform. They found an ally in Jimmy Carter, who was the first president to openly advocate for state-based marijuana decriminalization and appointed as his drug czar Dr. Peter Bourne, a proponent of treatment over enforcement for offenders.

The tide of public opinion began to shift when Bourne was forced to resign after Stroup leaked to the press that Bourne had snorted cocaine at a NORML Christmas party (Stroup was angry over the spraying of the weed paraquat over marijuana fields in Mexico). Parent activists at this time began mobilizing against liberalization measures out of concern for their kids. Many, such as Marsha Manatt Schuchard, were actually liberals who had supported the civil rights movement. Allying with medical doctors like Robert DuPont who considered marijuana to be a gateway substance to harder drugs, they crisscrossed the country giving lectures and producing pamphlets, which ultimately fed into the anti-drug agenda of Ronald and Nancy Reagan and lent support to the War on Drugs.

The excesses of the War on Drugs in turn inspired a new generation of pro-marijuana activists who raised alarm about a “new Jim Crow” and publicized the medical merits of marijuana in its ability to alleviate the nausea and sickness associated with chemotherapy and HIV/AIDS and to cure glaucoma. Among the activists was Mary Jane Rathburn, the “Florence Nightingale of Medical Marijuana,” who became well-known in the 1990s for baking marijuana brownies and caring for the terminally ill in San Francisco. Dufton points out that with Americans dying in large numbers from AIDS, “a matronly woman giving brownies to the sick didn’t seem like a terribly objectionable offense” (p. 217). The public in turn increasingly came to support medical marijuana as the backlash against the 1960s generation eroded.

Dufton is a good writer who records the history of marijuana activism with skill. Her book includes a good mix of secondary and primary sources along with firsthand interviews. Dufton might have extended her discussion to the realm of the global war on pot and could have used the marijuana issue to provide a more penetrating analysis of the “culture wars” that have polarized American society since the 1960s. While she rightly emphasizes grassroots activists, she could have also considered the role of powerful special interests in fueling the anti-marijuana backlash and financing conservative politicians. These interests include Big Pharma and the military-defense contractors who had a vested stake in demonizing the hippies and ratcheting up militarized law enforcement spending.

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