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May 1, 2002 By Alex MacDonald

“Chanting “Liar!” some 200 San Franciscans jeered Asa Hutchinson, head of the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), in February when he said, ”Science has told us so far there is no medical benefit for smoking marijuana." The crowd, including city leaders, confronted the Bush appointee, a former right-wing congressmember, a day after the agency conducted high-profile raids of medical-marijuana clubs and arrested club officials in northern California and British Columbia. After dynamiting the door to the city’s Harm Reduction Center, agents seized 8,300 plants, $58,000 in cash, a .22 handgun and a shotgun. Conviction carries up to 40 years in prison.

California voters legalized pot-for-pain in 1996. In 2001, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that federal laws criminalizing the herb trump state law. After the attacks, San Francisco DA Terrence Hallinan called on the DEA “to respect the wishes of the people of California and stay out of the marijuana clubs of San Francisco.” Local activists suspect that the stepped-up raids -- the first occurred last fall in LA -- are intended to intimidate the harm-reduction movement. Hutchinson claims the DEA was targeting not the clubs but a large-scale Canadian smuggling operation that supplies them.

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