

Ticked & Stoned

July 1, 2002

The streets of San Francisco -- the seedier ones -- have long been a free-trade zone for pot dealers. But for three days last April any penniless head could find a quick high just by taking a few deep breaths while ambling past the upscale, downtown Crowne Plaza Union Square Hotel. There, stoners attending the 2002 Conference of the National Organization for Reform of Marijuana Laws (NORML) stepped out from the smoke-free hotel to tokes and compare notes on the Bush administration's recent reefer madness and how to "treat" it. The San Francisco cops didn't mess with the crowd of mostly white activists ranging across three generations.

Inside the hotel, the tokers focused (or tried to) on the issues surrounding implementation of the various medical-marijuana laws in eight states and counting. Like the federal opponents of the new state laws, most of the confabers see medical marijuana as a prelude to broader decriminalization of the weed. However, unlike the Drug Enforcement Administration and the Supreme Court, the stoners are unanimous in their belief in marijuana's therapeutic benefits, especially for relief of pain, nausea and depression, and as an appetite stimulant for people with AIDS and cancer. The Bushies' determination to nullify the state laws has this typically laidback crowd up in arms. They know their science, too.

But, as befits a stoner conference, a mellow, if theatrical, humor underlay the anger. Locally famous defense attorney Tony Serra, for example, punctuated each item in a long litany of constitutional rights that he alleges are routinely trampled in the drug war by pummeling the podium with a bouquet of flowers as his comrades cheered. He concluded by inhaling deeply from another bouquet before pronouncing, "This flower represents medical marijuana." He inhaled again: "This flower will cancel the war!"

Bill Maher, host of ABC's newly cancelled *Politically Incorrect*, injected a bit of comedy at the conference's end to mobilize complacent voters: "Manipulate the media. Point out the hypocrisy to parents, politicians and celebrities. Ted Turner, Harrison Ford, George W. Bush and Al Gore -- they remember when drugs were fun." The stoners seemed oddly confident that the federal prohibition against pot for pain will eventually roil the nation's suburbs and bring about reform. Take another toke.