The marijuana debate

I went to college during the early counterculture years—when long hair and beards were scary to the older generation, when rejection of the Vietnam War was merging with rejection of society, when Bob Dylan was growling out the mantras for the hip generation and when most college campuses had a pungent haze hovering over them. In many ways, the source of that haze, marijuana, became a symbol of the rebellion students were embracing. Enticing, enjoyable and illegal, smoking pot was what you did when you abandoned your parents’ world. I never quite joined the counterculture. My hair was longish but never hippie-grade. My politics were liberal but to the right of the Students for a Democratic Society. And although I tried it (yes, Bill, I did inhale), I never quite got into pot.

So for a product of the ’60s like me, the recent legalization first of medical marijuana and then of recreational marijuana in some states seems like a bit of a trip. How could something that was spoken of only sotto voce among friends in the ’60s vault into such legitimacy in the 21st century? Did the tuned-out generation and their musical gurus have a lock on truth that staid society is only now discovering?

Mary Jane’s journey to legality has been and continues to be rocky. Since 1970, when the Food and Drug Administration placed marijuana in Schedule I, where it keeps company with heroin, federal efforts to suppress usage and distribution have been couched in military jargon. The heat of the war on drugs that lumped Colombian drug lords with possessors of dime bags of grass has varied from the torrid efforts of the Reagan administration to the lukewarm dabblings of the Clinton years.

Despite President Obama’s hints that some relaxation of federal prosecution of marijuana offenders might occur, users, growers and distributors continue to be caught and prosecuted. This triggers a tricky balancing act in the states that have legalized pot for medicinal use and in Colorado and Washington, which have approved it for recreational use. As Alyson Martin and Nushin Rashidian explained in their recent book The New Leaf: The End of Cannabis Prohibition, the United States has “four distinct stances on cannabis within its borders. Seventeen states have decriminalized simple cannabis possession and use. Twenty states and Washington, D.C., have legalized cannabis for medical use alone. Colorado and Washington have legalized and regulated cannabis for general use by adults 21 and over. And finally, the federal government maintains that cannabis possession for any purpose is a crime in every state.”

Even though pot smoking has achieved a social acceptability in some circles to the point that a recent New York Times article suggested that we needed an Emily Post to “codify” the etiquette of pot smoking at parties, the debate is far from over even in states with legalized marijuana. Is the drug safe or at least safer than alcohol? What will easier availability do to the black market? Will it be a “starter drug” for young people and fuel the use of harder drugs? After considering these and other complex questions, the MMA Board recently voted not to support legalization for medicinal purposes or the bill that would legalize medicinal marijuana that appears to be stalled in the Minnesota Legislature.

So perhaps Mary Jane is no longer counterculture, but it remains as controversial as it was when Dylan was singing “everybody must get stoned.” MM

Charles Meyer can be reached at meyer073@umn.edu.