

Tom Hayden, Paul Krassner

Old Home Week at the NORML Conference

Trim, white-haired Tom Hayden gave a talk at the NORML conference in Los Angeles Oct. 4. NORML is the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws. It was founded in 1970 by Keith Stroup, who is now the group's trim, white-haired general counsel.

Hayden had been invited and was introduced by Fort Lauderdale attorney Norm Kent, who recounted Tom's resume from Freedom Rider at the start of the '60s to California Assemblyman and State Senator (1982-2000) and, most recently, a participant in the Caravan for Peace.

Hayden congratulated NORML on its longevity. The early feminists didn't live to see women get the vote, he observed. "It seems to be a law of social change that it comes inch by inch. Each inch is sacred ground."

Glass high-rises loomed above the Omni hotel in downtown L.A., where the event was held. "Here in Southern California we are in the former Mexico," Tom reminded the pot partisans. "We are on the border of Central America, our population is heavily Mexican and Latino."

Hayden writes for *The Nation*. He had covered the recent election that returned the PRI to power in Mexico. "Some 60 to 70,000 people have been killed since 2007 when Calderon came to power," he said, "backed by the U.S. Republican Party, by George Bush in particular, and unleashed for the first time the Mexican Army in Mexico City against Mexico's civilian population in constant offensives and battles that left all these people dead. The funding came from the United States the advisers came from the DEA the weapons came from the United States illegally over the border. The whole thing was an extension of U.S. national drug policy and national security policy. It was met with a terrible silence, I thought, in this country which is the country of destination, so called, for the drugs that were being suppressed by the Mexican army. The center of gravity in this war had been in Mexico, so I was quite interested in the movement that started among Mexican victims of drug violence. A movement for peace and dignity led by a poet, Javier Sicilia, whose son Juan was killed in a crossfire last year.

"It was a little bit like the phenomenon of Mothers Against Drunk Driving but quite different. It was a movement whose hard core was people who saw themselves as victims. They had experienced the disappearance of members of their families — at least 10,000 people have disappeared—the death of people in their families, the beheading of people and torture and execution of people in their families... And while most 'victims' movements' —so characterized— play into the hands of law enforcement with calls for more police, more weapons, more prisons, more suppression, in this case the movement was more along the lines of saying 'Enough this has to end.'

"This war is causing more suffering than any suffering it seeks to suppress or prevent. The issue is a corrupt government, a corrupt police force, a corrupt army, a corrupt judicial system and prison system and tens of thousands of people who are being slaughtered at the behest of the United States. So it should end.

"These were people who were not calling for the legalization of drugs, although I think the consensus is that marijuana should be legalized. They were calling for an end to the drug war on the assumption that nothing good can come of it...

"Sicilia himself is a man of the left, doesn't belong to political parties, a poet

He seems to channel and sum up the feelings of all these people and they started a caravan around the country with hundreds of thousands of people joining. But the core of it was people who had suffered — really suffered— much more than in many grassroots movements that we participate in. It was kind of like a therapeutic experience connected to their political demands. So many people supported it that the political parties all had to meet with Sicilia. He told me that he was more a follower of Gandhi and that he believes in dialog. He talks to people in the army, in the government. His heroic figure is John the Baptist.

"They got busloads of people and they went to 25 cities. Yes, they did New York and Los Angeles, but the 25 cities were mainly cities with majorities of people of color and they were looking for other people who had suffered victimization, violence, incarcerations. They were looking to build a community — a coalition of people all across the United States. I met them in Mexico to get a sense of who they were and then I met them in Austin. From Austin they were going to Mississippi, and Alabama then north to Chicago and Washington DC. They were exhausted when I met them at a church in Austin. I spent a couple of days with them.

A peace movement of a different kind

"So this was a peace movement of a different kind. I've been involved in peace movements against the war in Vietnam, the wars in Central America, the wars in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq; and I know how important and powerful people in the streets can be.... It struck me as curious —

an important gap— that there hasn't been a peace movement perspective brought against the drug war. Not to the extent that there needs to be and should be... It seems that that would be a strong complementary demand to marijuana legalization."

Hayden spoke briefly about South American demands on the U.S. for a non-military approach to drugs.

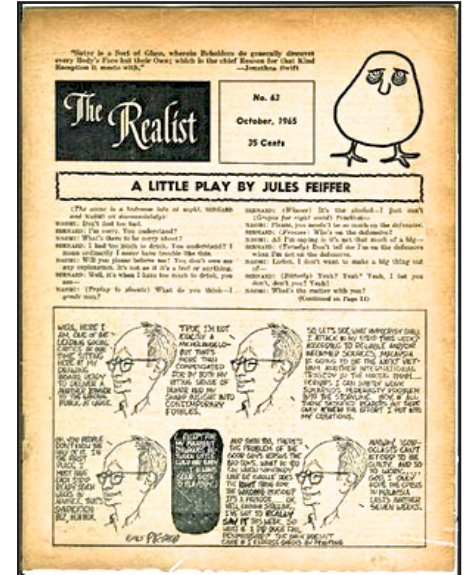
"The drug war is now becoming a serious impediment to the U.S. conducting its foreign policy in Latin America and Central America. That's on top of the moral, economic, political, health, and other issues that all of you have raised. I think an effort to mobilize a peace movement against the drug war is not only overdue but could be decisive in bringing about success to your efforts. I hope so."

I got to my feet and said "Right on!" for auld lang sine.

Krassner Than Ever

Paul Krassner did a stand-up routine (sitting down) on the "Marijuana and the Senior Citizen" panel. Krassner hit the scene in the late 1950s with *The Realist*, a biting, bawdy satirical rag that was like Lenny Bruce on newsprint. To the NORML audience Krassner revealed, "I owe my longevity to never taking any legal drugs. Although a few months ago I did take an aspirin. I didn't have a headache or anything. I was at a party, they were just passing them around. It was just submission to peer pressure."

Krassner's patter is a syncopated mix of straight jabs (facts) and looping left hooks (jokes). He noted that the Partnership for a Drug-Free America was funded by the alcohol, tobacco and prescription-drug industries. "Ambien is supposed to put you to sleep but you can wake up and drive to



the 7-11 and buy a Hershey bar and you don't even remember... Provacol is supposed to make you feel not depressed but one of the side-effects is suicidal tendencies. That's also one of the side effects of Ambien. So you could commit suicide without knowing it so you wouldn't know to leave a note."

The NORML leaders had given their conference a bold name: "The Final Days of Prohibition." Grampa Paul said slyly, "These are the last days of prohibition. But we we don't know how long the final days will last."

At one point he was reaching for a thought and turned to his notes. "I made a few notes," he said, "because my memory is okay but my vocabulary is escaping." I knew just what he meant.

"Drones have killed 175 children in Pakistan. Obama says he's not perfect and he's right."

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"When I took LSD I told my mother and she was very worried. She said it could lead to marijuana. And my mother was right.

"People are afraid of it. When High Times ran a questionnaire, one question was 'Is it possible to smoke too much pot?' And a reader replied 'I don't much understand the question.'

"Recreational marijuana serves as an enhancer. If you're going to have a great dinner and you get stoned before it, it enhances the taste. If you go to a movie, it enhances the film experience. If you're gonna have sex, it enhances the sensuality of it. Listening to music is very much enhanced by getting stoned. And I've been getting stoned before I roll a joint in order to enhance that experience.

"As long as any government can decide arbitrarily which drugs are illegal, then anyone in prison for a drug offense is a political prisoner."

Krassner credited the writer/organizer-Harvey Wasserman with the observation that "the prohibition of marijuana is the cornerstone of the police state."

After riffing about some new plant strains ("Michael Phelps," "OG Charlie Sheen"), the octogenarian realist expressed the hope that Obama would stage "an October surprise and remove marijuana from Schedule one. In honor of that fantasy we would have another strain of medical marijuana called 'October Surprise.'"

Incidentally, the doctors in the Society of Cannabis Clinicians all report that the average age of their patients keeps rising. "I'm seeing a surprising number of patients in their seventies and eighties lately," says Jeffrey Hergenrath, MD, of Sebastopol.

