

Retro message from an unprejudiced historian:

‘Reefer Madness’ in Mexico Preceded U.S. Prohibition

HOME GROWN: Marijuana and the origins of Mexico’s War on Drugs

By Isaac Campos. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2012.

The Conventional Wisdom is that marijuana prohibition was first imposed early in the 20th century by sheriffs in southwestern states seeking to increase their power over Mexican immigrants who had brought the herb from south of the border, where smoking it was part of the culture, no big deal. Then, the Conventional Wisdom continues, Hearst newspapers and Harry Anslinger’s Federal Bureau of Narcotics concocted and publicized stories of marijuana use causing violence and insanity, which led to Congress imposing a federal ban in 1937.

Isaac Campos, an assistant professor at the University of Cincinnati, reverses this gringo-centric version of history. Campos traces American marijuana prohibition back to Mexico (where it was imposed by the federal government in 1920), and from there back to the Spanish Inquisition. It’s a direct line and Campos draws it clearly—and documents it—in this retro-message of a book.

The following summary of his thesis is from the introduction to Home Grown. Our commentary continues on the next page.

—FG

Around the year 1530, a conquistador named Pedro Quadrado left his small village near Seville and traveled to the New World. After actively participating in the ongoing conquest of Mexico, Quadrado received a coveted *encomienda*, or royal tribute and labor grant, to undertake the cultivation of cannabis there. He thus became the first person to cultivate this species in the Americas.

That, anyway, is what he himself claimed, and probably with justification, for it was not until June 1545 that the Spanish Crown first ordered its subjects to sow cannabis in the New World.

For the Spanish, cannabis was first and foremost a fiber plant. They called it *cáñamo*. Tall, green, and gangly, of round seeds and “abominable smell,” this was an extraordinarily common cultivar whose strong fibers, or hemp, made clothing, rope, and the broad and sturdy sails that powered the greatest sea-borne empire the world had ever known. Thus began the long journey of cannabis through Mexican history, one that would eventually see its meaning and identity radically transformed.

The first signs of that transformation appeared in the 1770s. By then, cannabis had found its way into local medical-religious practice, and its seeds and leaves were sold by herb dealers under the name *pipiltzintlis*, or “the most noble princes.”

Though still cherished by Spanish officials as an industrial fiber, there were growing rumors that, for Indians, it also facilitated visions, communion with the devil, and sometimes madness. Prohibitionist edicts briefly raised the profile of these noble princes, but the name *pipiltzintlis* would soon fade into obscurity, as would (temporarily) the drug use of cannabis in Mexico.

A new generation of nationalist botanists would rediscover cannabis drugs during the 1850s. These men became interested in cataloging Mexico’s “indigenous” natural wonders, and in the process they noted that

“certain Mexicans” had begun smoking the stuff. The word *pipiltzintlis* was no longer in use, but two other local designations, both of which helped to reinforce the plant’s apparent indigeneity, had emerged: *rosa maría* and *mariguana*.

The former would also soon disappear, leaving the word *mariguana*, or *marihuana*—or as it is now spelled in English, “marijuana”—to conquer the lexica of most of the Western Hemisphere.

Though these nationalist botanists saw potential value in this “local” drug plant, their writings would soon be overwhelmed by the view that this was a quintessentially indigenous “narcotic” causing madness, violence, and mayhem. In 1886, for example, a Mexican medical student delivered a thesis in the field of legal medicine on marijuana and the insanity defense, concluding that “the criminal responsibility of an individual in a state of acute marijuana intoxication should be exactly the same as that of the maniac,” namely none.

By 1898, Mexico City’s leading daily could claim that “for years the press has described horrifying crimes, criminal eccentricities and suicides, which place before the court of public opinion individuals whose type oscillates between furious madmen and criminals worthy of being placed before the firing squad, and one after another case demonstrates that the murderer, the rapist, the insubordinate, the presumed suicide, and the scandalous acted under the influence of marihuana.”

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, hundreds of newspaper stories described marijuana’s effects in similar fashion.

Descriptions like this one of marijuana’s effects not only were standard during the late 19th and early 20th centuries but also went virtually unchallenged. As I demonstrate in chapter four, a close analysis of more than 400 Mexican newspaper articles—drawn from over a dozen publications, both liberal and conservative, and all describing the effects of marijuana—reveals that not a single article questioned this basic stereotype.

Given that these papers were published in an environment of significant media competition and that they routinely lambasted each other for untruths and sensationalism, this unblemished record is quite extraordinary. Furthermore, there is evidence that lower-class Mexicans, most of whom were illiterate, were equally convinced of marijuana’s frightening effects. As one commentator revealed in 1908: “The horror that this plant inspires has reached such an extreme that when the common people . . . see even just a single plant, they feel as if in the presence of a demonic spirit. Women and children run frightened and they make the sign of the cross simply upon hearing its name.”

In 1920, after labeling marijuana a threat to “degenerate the race,” Mexican sanitary authorities banned the drug nationwide, 17 years prior to similar legislation in the United States.

Originally an industrial fiber symbolizing European imperial expansion, cannabis had been transformed by the dawn of the twentieth century into a quintessentially indigenous, and putatively dangerous,

Mexican drug plant. Thus, in 1920, after labeling marijuana a threat to “degenerate the race,” Mexican sanitary authorities banned the drug nationwide, 17 years prior to similar legislation in the United States.

For those readers familiar with the existing historical and social scientific scholarship on drugs in North America, much of this may come as a surprise. The War on Drugs is routinely described as “America’s War on Drugs” and the drug problem as an “American disease,” where “America” means the United States and the rest of the Americas have been cajoled or forced into cooperating.

Global drug prohibition has recently been portrayed as a kind of “informal American cultural colonization,” while Latin America has been identified as a place where, prior to U.S. involvement, substances like marijuana and peyote were an accepted part of “Indian and Latin American culture.”

The problem is not that historians have looked deeply at the origins of drug prohibition in Latin America and gotten it all wrong. The problem is that historians simply have not looked deeply at the origins of drug prohibition in Latin America.

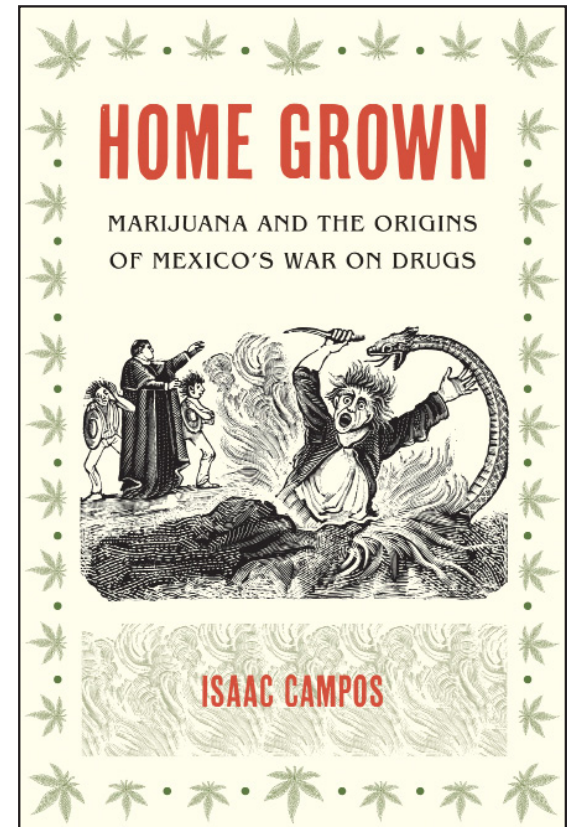
Not a single monograph exists, for example, on the birth of these policies in Mexico. This is a remarkable fact given the tremendous political, social, and economic costs that the War on Drugs have produced in that country over the last century. Drug prohibition is the *sine qua non* of the War on Drugs. Without prohibition, there is no black market, and without a black market, there are no “narcotraffickers” to demonize, no illicit drug users to incarcerate, and no national security threat to declare.

Scholars who date the War on Drugs to Richard Nixon’s formal declaration of that “war” in 1971, or to the Reagan-era militarization of the conflict, are missing the forest for the trees.

That is why scholars who date the War on Drugs to Richard Nixon’s formal declaration of that “war” in 1971, or to the Reagan-era militarization of the conflict, are missing the forest for the trees. Nixon merely intensified an antidrug crusade that formally began at the federal level in the United States (and Mexico) in the early 20th century.

Certainly that “war” became more militarized in the late 1980s, but neither was this completely new. Mexico’s military, for example, had been eradicating drugs intended for the U.S. market since the late 1930s. In sum, the origins of the War on Drugs lie in the legal and ideological roots of prohibition. With respect to marijuana in North America, those origins have their deepest roots in Mexico.

Marijuana also provides a simply fascinating case study for U.S.-based historians interested in the ideological foundations of drug prohibition. It is a substance whose inclusion among “Schedule 1” drugs in the United States is often cited as a fanatical excess of extremist drug warriors, an un-



scientific designation proving that politics, not rationality, drives the War on Drugs. It is a compelling argument. After all, there is not a single death on record that can be attributed to overindulgence in marijuana, while serious research has long demonstrated that alcohol and tobacco are generally more habit-forming and unhealthy for their users than is cannabis.

Yet despite today’s typical view of marijuana as a “soft” drug in comparison to, say, the opiates and cocaine, Mexicans of a century ago believed it to be perhaps the “hardest” drug of them all, one that triggered sudden paroxysms of delirious violence. Could marijuana really have produced these effects?

And, whatever the answer, what was it about the historical circumstances of the day that made such descriptions so eminently believable? How is it possible that not a single newspaper or scientific source seriously challenged their veracity?

Finally, how did the radical transformation of cannabis’s meaning occur in Mexico between the sixteenth and twentieth century? Where in the plant’s long journey through Mexican history did these changes occur?

These are the questions around which this book is organized. By answering them, I hope to better explain marijuana’s prohibition in Mexico, itself a key to understanding the origins of the War on Drugs in that country and, to a certain extent, in North America as a whole.

Ultimately, the evidence will demonstrate that marijuana prohibition can only be described as a kind of “informal American cultural colonization” if one takes the radical step of considering Mexico as worthy of the “America” label as its powerful neighbor, for in this case the influence mostly flowed northward. Marijuana’s prohibition in Mexico was, in short, home grown.



copyright © 2012 by the University of North Carolina Press. Used by permission of the publisher. www.uncpress.unc.edu.

'Reefer Madness' in Mexico continued from previous page

The church and the elites had contempt for the 'Indians' who used hemp as a drug

The War on Plants

Following the expulsion of Jews from Spain, an Inquisition was launched in 1480 to expose "conversos" who had formally converted to Catholicism but were secretly practicing Judaism at home. The Inquisitors used torture as an investigative tool. It expanded into a permanent search for "heretics" and would last some 350 years.

The Spanish conquest of Mexico by Hernan Cortes in 1521 was accompanied by a network of missions imposing Catholicism on the native peoples. Infectious diseases to which the Europeans had immunity — smallpox, typhus, and measles— rapidly reduced the population from an estimated 10-to-20 million to around two million. Those who survived were forced into slave labor in the silver mines that fed the Spanish treasury and the fields surrounding the missions that provided food and fiber for the colonial masters.

For the Spanish, cannabis was valued above all as a source of strong fiber used in the production of various products, none more important than the sails and ropes that powered the imperial navy.

As Oscar Campos writes in *Home Grown*, "For the Spanish, cannabis was valued above all as a source of strong fiber used in the production of various products, none more important than the sails and ropes that powered the imperial navy. Thus in 1545, the Spanish Crown officially mandated its cultivation in the Americas: 'We order the Viceroy and Governors that they mandate the cultivation of hemp and flax in the Indies, and that they get the Indians to apply themselves to this farming and to weaving and spinning flax.'"

After referring to farmers named Hernandez who grew hemp in Atlixco, Campos writes "In a process that was likely replicated around Mexico... some members of the Hernandez workforce had discovered the plants to be medicinally useful... Before long, the Indian employees of the old farm had taken some samples home and begun cultivating their own medicinal cannabis in the sunny corners of their gardens.

"By the middle of the 18th century, Indians around the region had begun referring to cannabis with the name *pipiltzintzintlis* and were employing it for purposes of divination. As a result, *pipiltzintzintlis* had been banned by the Inquisition." Violators



DECEITFUL DEPICTION OF CONQUISTADORS arriving in the New World disses the natives, who were brownskinned, four inches taller than the Spaniards on average, healthier in all respects, with "teeth like piano keys" according to one European observer.

were prosecuted. "But neither the Inquisition nor other Spanish authorities appear to have had any idea that this substance was derived from cannabis."

The versatility of the plant caused the same kind of confusion that would be expressed by the U.S. manufacturers who were stunned when Congress banned marijuana in 1937! Campos continues:

"There appears to have developed a disconnect between official views of cannabis and those of ordinary folks in New Spain. The latter apparently understood this plant to be persecuted by the Inquisition under the name *pipiltzintzintlis* and therefore banned, while the former, ignorant of the link between cannabis and that notorious divinatory substance, expressed surprise that anyone could think that hemp production was illegal."

Given Spain's rivalry with Britain and Holland for naval supremacy, the crown urgently needed hemp to outfit its armada. In January 1777 the king ordered "that the Indians and mixed populations of the towns of those dominions apply themselves to the sowing, cultivation, and exploitation of hemp and flax... in order to foment the manufacture of cloth, canvas and rigging."

Enough hemp was planted here and there —and disseminated by itself—so that a century later "the presence of cannabis in the Mexican countryside would be sufficiently ubiquitous to help convince various observers that this substance must be indigenous to the region," according to Campos.

Mexico had achieved independence from Spain in 1821 after a peasants' rebellion ignited a war that lasted 11 years. The emerging ruling class was led by light-skinned progeny of the conquistadors. "With independence," Campos writes, "local medicinal knowledge and material became a potential source of the national wealth." In the 1820s and '30s a National Museum was founded to promote botanical research; an Academy of Surgical Medicine began compiling an "indigenous pharmacopoeia;" another new institute "featured a field of study in medicinal plants... conceived as a crucial tool for the mapping of the Mexican nation;" and a national Academy of Pharmacy was founded.

Though cannabis was actually an import, "its gradual adoption into local medical practice had

"It is not rare to see illnesses which have been combated assiduously, energetically, and philosophically by physicians, finally surrender, as if through magic, to a concoction at which the physician scoffs, composed of simple ingredients and prepared by some old woman." —Pharmacologist Leonardo Oliva

imbued it with a certain indigeneity by association.

In 1842 a list of "The Most Common Elemental Medicines included The *Farmacopea Mexicana*" distinguished *Cannabis indica* (aka *Rosa Maria*, *Canamo del pais*, *mariguana*) and *Cannabis sativa* (aka *canamo*). Campos cites pharmacologist Leonardo Oliva, who in the mid-1850s urged Mexican scientists "to take seriously the knowledge of country folk and Indians, whose empirical approach to these remedies had long been scorned by scientific medicine. 'It is not rare to see illnesses which have been combated assiduously, energetically, and philosophically by physicians, finally surrender, as if through magic, to a concoction at which the physician scoffs, composed of simple ingredients and prepared by some old woman.' It should be the object of science, Oliva believed, to take up such knowledge and perfect it through experimentation."

The respectful approach to folk medicine advocated by Oliva was scorned by ruling-class elitists who were descended from, identified with, and aspired to social acceptance by Europeans.

Unfortunately, Campos recounts, the window of opportunity quickly closed. The respectful approach to folk medicine advocated by Oliva was scorned by ruling-class elitists who were descended from, identified with, and aspired to social acceptance by Europeans. To them, marijuana, was a drug used by Indians —especially soldiers and prisoners—and associated with the "backward" societies of Asia and the Middle East.

The Thousand and One Nights had "popularized the view that cannabis produced dreamlike hallucinations that led users down the path to embarrassment and ridicule," writes Campos, who calls the Persian classic "surely the most famous of 'Oriental' sources."

Medieval Muslim authorities linked cannabis to "every conceivable malady ...including destruction of the mind, hallucinations and insanity."

A French "Orientalist" named Silvre de Sacy (not a botanist, Campos notes) established, presumably, that the word "assassin" derived from "hashish." Sacy's etymological evidence "did as much as anything to legitimize the view among Westerners that cannabis had the potential to produce at least fantastic visions if not violence in its users."



ISAAC CAMPOS

Campos effectively challenges Sacy. (There are fascinating, insightful riffs throughout the book.) "Sacy's theory was based in the history of a medieval Shiite Islamic sect called the Isma'ilis, popularly known as the 'Order of the Assassins.' The Isma'ilis were much maligned during the Middle Ages by both rival Muslims and Christians..."

"There exists no evidence, however, that the Isma'ilis or, in particular, the *fidawi* assassins [the original suicide bombers] had anything to do with hashish. The original sources never explain why the word is utilized, and as historian Farhad Daftary has argued, it seems rather unlikely that warriors sent out on such difficult and sensitive missions would have taken a potentially disorienting drug in order to carry them out. Furthermore, *hashisha* was a term used as a general insult in the Arab world due to its association with heretics and the rabble of society."

In every culture where it is scorned, marijuana is associated with heretics and the rabble of society. Religious authorities see it as a threat to their influence, and poor people can readily obtain it. And so it was in Mexico in the mid-19th century.

The Psychoactive Riddle

Reports of marijuana inducing madness appeared in the Mexican press with increasing frequency in the second half of the 20th century. Campos analyzed nearly 600 articles and concluded, "Though marijuana use was not especially widespread during this period, its profile was nonetheless extremely well defined: it was overwhelmingly associated with two closely related demographics (prisoners and soldiers) and two closely related effects (madness and violence)."

He provides a typical vignette: "Last Saturday around 11 in the morning there was a great disturbance in San Pablo plaza... People ran as if they were pursued by an African lion... the author was a soldier who, under the influence of marijuana, and with a knife in hand, frantically attacked the passersby, wounding people left and right."

According to Campos, "Marijuana madness might, for example, involve outlandish, insubordinate behavior by soldiers. On November 14, 1878, *El Monitor Republicano* reported that, on the second of that month, the soldiers of the Fifteenth Battalion had been called to order for inspection, and in the process, one soldier, who was 'excited by marijuana,' broke ranks and began shouting seditious messages to the troops. A captain tried to reduce him to order only to receive bayonet wounds to the hand and hip. Others then responded with gunfire and wounded their seditious comrade. In the scuffle, two other soldiers managed to desert."

No Mexican newspaper —left, right, or center politically—questioned the validity of the marijuana-causes-madness stories.



Devil Weeds

Isaac Campos quotes the decree by which the Inquisition in 1620 "formally banned the use of peyote and similar substances" in New Spain: "Seeing that said herb, nor any other can possibly have by nature such virtues and efficacy that is attributed to the stated effects... and that in those one obviously sees the effects of the suggestion and assistance of the Devil, author of this abuse taking advantage of... indians and their inclination toward idolatry, and overcoming later many other people... we mandate that from here forward no one of whatever social status can use said herb, peyote, nor any others for the same or similar effects, under no title or color nor shall they encourage indians or other persons to take them understanding that if they do so... we will proceed against the rebellious and disobedient... as against persons suspected of violations against the Holy Catholic faith."



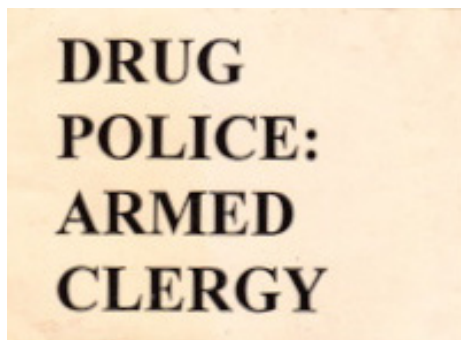
Paternoism

As Issac Campos notifies us in *Home Grown*, the American war on marijuana didn’t start with Harry Anslinger, it started with the Spanish Inquisition. This is not some far-out, unprovable hypothesis; it’s a documented set of facts that have been hiding in plain sight.

Nor is the anti-marijuana aspect of the Inquisition merely an interesting historical footnote. The Inquisition is still with us, still going on. Yes, it had to go underground in the mid-19th century. But its adherents in the church hierarchy simply pretended to give up their holy war on witches, Jews, Muslims, and plants associated with Satan—while actually pursuing that war with relentless zeal. They are the ultimate *conversos*.

Tod Mikuriya, MD, once made up a bumper sticker that said “Drug Police: Armed Clergy.” It was before I knew him and I don’t know what he had in mind for them, or how it came off. His message came to mind recently when the *New York Times* ran a piece about Joe Paterno’s education at Brooklyn Prep, a Jesuit high school in Crown Heights. The article named some other distinguished alumni of Brooklyn Prep: Joseph Califano, John Lawn, and Robert Bennett.

Joe Califano is the founder and president emeritus of the Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University, the leading Prohibitionist think-tank. From Brooklyn Prep he went on to the College of the Holy Cross and then Harvard Law School. In the ‘60s, as the Vietnam war heated up, he was a Special Assistant to President Lyndon Johnson—first as liaison to the Defense Department, then as the White House liaison to Congress.



STICKER MADE BY TOD MIKURIYA for consciousness-raising purposes.

After LBJ was dissuaded from seeking re-election by the peace movement, Califano joined the powerful Washington law firm Williams & Connolly.

Jimmy Carter made Califano his secretary of Health, Education and Welfare (1977-’79). When Reagan was elected in 1980 he went back to lawyer/lobbying in D.C.

He founded CASA in ‘92 and is its leading mouthpiece to this day. (In July 2012 he was on John McLaughlin’s show decrying the devil weed, etc.) Califano has published 12 books—most recently “How to Raise a Drug Free Kid—the Straight Dope for Parents.”

John Lawn, who ran the Drug Enforcement Administration under Ronald Reagan and George Poppy Bush, is the bureaucrat who rejected Judge Francis Young’s recommended decision in the suit brought by NORML to move marijuana from Schedule 1 (dangerous drug with no known medical use) to Schedule 2.

The federal government had stalled for 14 years before Young, an administrative law judge reviewing the evidence for the DEA, conducted a hearing that itself took two years. Young famously concluded in 1988 that marijuana is “one of the safest therapeutically active substances known to man” and that provisions of the Controlled Substances Act “require” its removal from Sked 1.

John Lawn sat on Judge Young’s finding for another year, then nixed it with a stroke of the pen. NORML appealed and in 1994 the D.C. Court of Appeal confirmed that the head of a federal agency could indeed ignore the findings of an administrative law judge.

Bob Bennett is the older brother of Bill, the Drug Czar under Reagan. (The family had moved to Washington, D.C., by the time Bill was ready for high school, so he went to Gonzaga.)

Bob Bennett attended Harvard Law and spent most of his career at the aforementioned Williams & Connolly. His high-profile clients included Caspar Weinberger, Reagan’s Secretary of Defense who helped orchestrate the Iran-Contra weapons deal; Judy Miller, the *NY Times* reporter who fanned the flames for invading Iraq with false reports of weapons of mass destruc-

“A culture of reverence for the football team”



PENN STATE FOOTBALL COACH JOE PATERNO was educated at the same Jesuit prep school as leading Drug Warriors, including Joe Califano and John Lawn. After it became known to Paterno that an assistant, Jerry Sandusky, was a child molester, Paterno took part in a cover-up involving Penn State’s top administrators, and Sandusky went on abusing children for many years... Sexual abuse is more heinous than physical abuse. Perhaps if the latter had not been tolerated at Brooklyn Prep, Joe Paterno would have not tolerated the former at Penn State... An investigation of the cover-up by former FBI Director Louis Freeh noted “a culture of reverence for the football program” at Penn State.

“It wasn’t hell you were afraid of, it was Father Engel.”

tion; and neo-con chicken-hawk Paul Wolfowitz who got bounced from heading the World Bank after it was revealed that he had arranged excessive compensation for a lady friend.

Bob Bennett also served on the Catholic Bishops’ “National Review Board for the Protection of Children & Young People.”

He and the other lads at Brooklyn Prep could have used some protection themselves in their formative years. “The prefect of discipline was the Rev. Frederick W. Engel, a tall priest with the fists of a trained boxer who could instantly silence

“If somebody was out of line, he gave him a shot in the head.”

an auditorium filled with 300 shouting boys,” wrote Joseph Berger in the *Times*.

“It wasn’t hell you were afraid of, it was Father Engel,” said Gerry Uehlinger, class of ‘67, now a trial lawyer in Maryland... Paterno, class of 1944, also learned not to cross Father Engel. ‘If somebody was out of line, he gave him a shot in the head,’ Paterno told *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.”

The quasi-religious zeal of the Drug Warriors is not that hard to understand. “Father” smacked them around, so they have to smack us around. Forever and ever. Armed clergy, indeed.



JOE CALIFANO, BOB BENNETT, BILL BENNETT EXUDE SELF-SATISFACTION as they advise parents on how to raise their children. Don’t you want your children to grow up to be just like these three mean, dull blobs of pomposity?

‘Reefer Madness’ in Mexico *continued from previous page*

The church never stopped impressing the message on the masses. According to one observer quoted by Campos, “The horror that this plant inspires has reached such an extreme that when the common people, having little inclination to research the facts, see even just a single plant, they feel as if in the presence of a demonic spirit. Women and children run frightened and they make the sign of the cross simply upon hearing its name. The friars hurl their excommunications against those who grow and use it and the authorities persecute it with such fury that they order it be uprooted and burnt, imposing cruel penalties on whom they find it. In a word they believe that it is a weed that has come from hell and the ignorant masses curse and scorn it.”

The absence of a “counterdiscourse” to all the marijuana-causes-madness stories led Campos to suspect that the phenom-

enon of people running amok on weed had some basis in fact. Although he initially assumed that a given drug would have identical effects on all human populations, he soon realized that more than pharmacology is involved when people flip out or bliss out on drugs. He concluded, “The effect of psychoactive drugs are actually dictated by a complex tangle of pharmacology, psychology, and culture—or ‘drug, set, and setting.’”

In the second half of *Home Grown*, Campos explains why the set and setting in which *campesinos* consumed marijuana (often along with alcohol) might indeed have produced an inordinate amount of crazy acting-out. We won’t give away this part of the story, dear reader, because you really should buy Campos’s serious, insightful book. And/or request that your local public library order a copy.

“The power of a simple placebo to radically alter my state of consciousness impressed me deeply. The contribution of the mind to the observed action of a drug was certainly real, and I decided it was possible that this contribution was a major one.

“One has been taught to assign the power of a drug to the drug itself, without considering the person into whom it goes... There is a personal reality of the recipient of the drug that plays a major role in the definition of the eventual interaction. Each of us has his own personality, and each of us will construct his own unique drug-person relationship.”

—Alexander Shulgin

Great Joe Bob (A Regional Tragedy)

He was a panhandle prince
Schoolboy football king
They told him “Hi” in the halls
‘Cause he could run them balls
But it was rumored (down deep) he was mean
He dated high-tone girls
With frosty pom-pom curls
But he never gave out his ring
He was the best of the best
He met the grid-iron test
An there ain’t nothin as American
An clean

He was the pride of the backfield
Ahhh the hero of his day
Yeah he carried the ball for the red and blue
They won District Triple-A
An his name made all the papers
As the best they’d ever had
Yeah so nobody understood it
When the Great Joe Bob went bad

First he lost his scholarship
To Texas Tech
For drinking during training
An breaking the coach’s neck...yeah
Then he got suspended for acting obscene
Around the Cum-Laudy, Cum-Laudy
Daughter of the Dean
So...

He took up with a waitress
Named Loose Ruby Cole
While she was hoppin’ tables
Down at the Hi-D-Ho
An he met her on the sly
When her daddy weren’t around
Yeah but he stopped making yardage
When he started messin’ round

(chorus) He was the pride of the backfield...
Yeah it spread like a country wildfire
That something big had gone all strange
Joe Bob the Greatest Halfback
Was actin half-deranged
He’d been seen out with this woman
Gettin drunk and havin fun
Yeah he growed his hair, then gived up prayer
An said, “Football days is done”
Then...

He and old Loose Ruby
Robbed a Pinkie’s Liquor Store
An had a run-in with the law
When they’s runnin out the door
An Joe Bob’s fate was sealed
For the next century
Yeah he traded in the pigskin
For the penitentiary

(chorus) He was the pride of the backfield...

—Terry Allen