For Howard Zinn:
LaGuardia and the Truth About Marijuana


The Marihuana Problem in the City of New York by Mayor LaGuardia's Committee on Marihuana. 1944. (Reprinted in 1973 by the New York Academy of Medicine.)

By Fred Gardner
Fiorello LaGuardia was the mayor of New York City when Howard Zinn was growing up in Brooklyn during the Great Depression. Zinn admired LaGuardia and the end would have important things in common with him. LaGuardia had flown bombing missions for the U.S. Army over Italy during World War One. Zinn flew bombing missions over occupied France in World War Two. Both men would come to reconsider the worth of these missions. Both would spend their lives speaking for people whose voices hardly got heard.

LaGuardia in Congress established Zinn's reputation as a historian.

Zinn wrote his PhD dissertation on LaGuardia's years as a Congressman representing the tenement dwellers of East Harlem. (LaGuardia served in Congress from 1917 through 1933, minus his stint in the Army and two years as President of the New York City Board of Aldermen.)


"In the United States, the twenties were the years of Prosperity, and Fiorello LaGuardia is one of its few public figures who suspected to what extent that label was a lie," Zinn asserted.

Nor did LaGuardia mistake the twenties for "a time of quiet isolation from foreign affairs," Zinn wrote. "The United States was established as a dominant power in the Caribbean having purchased the Virgin Islands during the war, possessing a naval base in Cuba, and exercising such control over the Republic of Panama, Nicaragua, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic as to make them 'virtual protectores.' American influence in the Far East extended from the Aleutian Islands to Hawaii and across the western Pacific to the Philippines. LaGuardia opposed sending 5,000 troops to Nicaragua in 1927 to uphold a government subservient to U.S. lumber and fruit interests. "The protection of American life and property in Nicaragua does not require the formidable naval and marine forces operating there now," LaGuardia declared. "Give me 50 New York police and I can guarantee full protection.

Zinn wrote that LaGuardia did not see the 1920s as a time of "national political consensus: when a general mood of well-being softened political combat." Angered by Rep. Fred Vinson of Kentucky's reference to New York's "Italian blue" of voters, LaGuardia denounced the drastic restriction of immigration and particularly the "national origins" method of determining quotas... The restriction bills were "unscientific," LaGuardia charged, the "result of narrow-mindedness and bigotry" and "inspired by influences who have a fixed obsession..." LaGuardia was one of its few public figures who suspected to what extent that label was a lie.

The scientific part of the research was based on false facts that no one in Congress questioned, but which LaGuardia recognized as based on "misperceptions of marihuana's addictive and leads to insanity and violent crime. In 1938 LaGuardia, as mayor, assigned the New York City Board of Health, chaired by Colonel J.F. Siler of the Army, to investigate the premises of marijuana prohibition. A blue ribbon committee of 31 scientists was assembled. Physicians from the city Department of Hospitals conducted clinical research involving 77 patients. "My own interest in marihuana goes back many years," LaGuardia wrote in a foreword to the committee's report, "to the time when I was a member of the House of Representatives and, in that capacity, heard of the use of marihuana by soldiers stationed in Panama. I was impressed at that time with the report of an Army Board of Inquiry which emphasized the relative harmlessness of the drug and the fact that it played very little role, if any, in problems of delinquency and crime in the Canal Zone.

"The report of the present investigations covers every phase of the problem and is of practical value not only to our own city but to communities throughout the country. It is a basic contribution to medicine and pharmacology. I am glad that the sociological, psychological, and medical ills commonly attributed to marihuana have been found to be exaggerated.

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The full Report, The Marihuana Problem in the City of New York, was published in 1944. Its conclusions, verbatim: "Marijuana is used extensively in the Borough of Manhattan but the problem is not as acute as it is reported to be in other sections of the United States. The introduction of marijuana into this area is recent as compared to other localities. The cost of marijuana is low and there is little or no apprehension of the purchasing power of most persons. The distribution and use of marijuana is centered in Harlem. The majority of marijuana smokers are Blacks and Latin-Americans. The consensus among marijuana smokers is that the use of the drug creates no evidence that marijuana was addictive or that it had "any appreciable deleterious influence on the individuals using it." According to "the Great Book of Hemp" by Rowan Robinson, "Some commanders disagreed with the committee's findings and ordered a new investigation in 1929. The surgeon general who directed the inquiry duly reported that "use of the drug is not widespread and... its effects upon military efficiency and upon discipline are not great." A third investigation, initiated in June 1931, found no link between cannabis and any health, family, delinquency or moral problems." In the U.S.-run Canal Zone.

The 220-page LaGuardia Committee Report was reprinted in full in The Marihuana Papers, an anthology edited by David Solomon, published by Bobbs-Merrill in 1966 and in paperback the following year by Signet.

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What LaGuardia’s Police Investigators Found

Marijuana Use in New York City... All Those Years Ago

From The Marihuana Problem in the City of New York, also known as “The LaGuardia Committee Report.”

Method of Retail Distribution

In general, marihuana is used in the form of a cigarette. Occasionally some individuals chew the “weed” and seem to get the same effect as with cigarettes through smoking. The common names for the cigarettes are: muggles, refrees, Indian hemp, weed, tea, gage and sticks. Cigarettes made of marihuana differ in size as do cigarettes made of tobacco: they are long, short, thick or thin.

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The price varies in accordance with the accepted opinion as to the potency of the marihuana used in the cigarettes, and this appears to be determined by the place of origin. The cheapest brand is known as “sass-fas,” and retails for approximately three for 50 cents. It is made of the marihuana that is grown in the United States. Smokers do not consider such marihuana very potent. They have found that they must consume a greater number of cigarettes in order to obtain the desired effect colloquially termed as “high.” This opinion, expressed by smokers in the Borough of Manhattan, is at variance with that of some authorities who believe that marihuana grown in the United States is as potent as the marihuana grown in other countries.

The “panetalla” cigarette, occasionally referred to as “meserole,” is considered to be more potent than the “sass-fas” and usually retails for approximately 25 cents each. The hemp from which the “panetalla” is made comes from Central and South America. “Gungeez” is considered by the marihuana smoker as the highest grade of marihuana. It retails for about one dollar per cigarette. The “kick” resulting from the use of this cigarette is reached more quickly than from the use of “sas-safra” or “panetalla.” It appears to be the consensus that the marihuana used to make the “gungeez” comes from Africa. The sale of this cigarette is restricted to a clientele whose economic status is of a higher level than the majority of marihuana smokers.

A confirmed marihuana user can readily distinguish the quality and potency of various brands, just as the habitual smoker of tobacco is able to distinguish the various grades of tobacco.

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Cigarette or cigar smoker is able to differentiate between the qualities of tobacco. Foreign-made cigarette paper is often used in order to convince the buyer that the “tea is right from the boat.”

There are two channels for the distribution of the marihuana cigarettes—the independent peddler and the “tea-pad.” From general observations, conversations with “pad” owners, and discussions with peddlers, the investigators estimated that there were about 500 “tea-pads” in Harlem and at least 500 peddlers.

A “tea-pad” is a room or an apartment in which people gather to smoke marihuana. The majority of such places are located in the Harlem district. It is our impression that the landlord, the agent, the superintendent or the janitor is aware of the purposes for which the premises are rented. The “tea-pad” is furnished according to the clientele it expects to serve. Usually, each “tea-pad” has comfortable furniture, a radio, victrola or, as in most instances, a rented nickelodeon. The lighting is more or less uniformly dim, with blue predominating. An incense is considered part of the furnishings. The walls are frequently decorated with pictures of nude subjects suggestive of other practices. The furnishings, as described, are believed to be essential as a setting for those participating in smoking marihuana.

Most “tea-pads” have their trade restricted to the sale of marihuana. Some places did sell marihuana and whisky, and a few places also served as houses of prostitution. Only one “tea-pad” was found which served as a house of prostitution, and in which one could buy marihuana, whisky, and opium.

The marihuana smoker derives greater satisfaction if he is smoking in the presence of others. His attitude in the “tea-pad” is that of a relaxed individual, free from the anxieties and cares of the realities of life. The “tea-pad” takes on the atmosphere of a very congenial social club. The smoker readily engages in conversation with strangers, discussing freely his pleasant reactions to the drug and philosophizing on subjects pertaining to life in a manner which, at times, appears to be out of keeping with his intellectual level. A constant observation was the extreme willingness to share and puff on each other’s cigarettes. A boisterous, rowdy atmosphere did not prevail and on the rare occasions when there appeared signs indicative of a bellicose attitude on the part of a smoker, he was ejected or forced to become more tolerant and quiescent.

One of the most interesting setups of a “tea-pad”, which was clearly not along orthodox lines from the social point of view, was the “tea-pad” of the former governor of Pennsylvania, who was doing in Santa Monica when he died of a heart attack in late January of this year. —F.G.

The “Old Left” and Marijuana

In the political milieu from which Howard Zinn emerged, marijuana use was looked down on. This disapproval by the “old left” was rooted in ignorance, but it had a practical application. If you were, say, a union organizer, you wouldn’t want to give management spies an excuse to report you to the cops. The light for higher wages and better working conditions would take precedence over your desire to smoke reefer (which was almost certainly nil, because few Americans, especially white folks, had ever touched the stuff)

The “new left” of the ‘60s had a different attitude towards marijuana because millions of people on college campuses and in the military had started smoking it by 1966, and recognized that it wasn’t dangerous. Freedom to smoke marijuana became an auxiliary goal of “the movement” that was primarily aimed at ending racial segregation and bringing the troops home from Vietnam.

The Communist Party Line on Marijuana

The New York Academy of Medicine report includes an example of a “reefer madness” story from the Daily Worker for Dec. 28, 1940. Headlined “Health Advice,” the Communist line on marijuana could easily have come from a William Randolph Hearst paper — minus any racist overtones, of course:

“Smoking of the weed is habit-forming. It destroys the will-power, releases and gives up the drug voluntarily without experiencing any craving for it or exhibiting withdrawal symptoms.”

Howard Zinn (left) in Berkeley, February 2009. He was staying with his granddaughter, getting away from the cold Boston winter. That’s what he was doing in Santa Monica when he died of a heart attack in late January of this year. —F.G.
Whereas the smoking of marihuana was not encouraged, nothing was done to discourage it. In the Harlem dance halls and bars, guides received money when acting as "pick-up" smoking. It is an established practice whereby a marihuana cigarette is passed on to the next person. This procedure is repeated until all present have had an opportunity to take a puff or two on the cigarette. Occasionally a "tea-pad" owner may have peddlers who sell their wares in other localities and at the same time serve as procurers for those who wish to smoke marihuana on the premises. One also finds other methods of retail distribution. After proper introduction, one may be able to purchase a cigarette in certain places. This is not an easy procedure, but it can be accomplished. In some bar-and-grills, restaurants, and bars our investigators were able to establish contact with someone who in turn would introduce them to a peddler who apparently made regular rounds of these places in order to sell cigarettes. It appears that the owners of such places are not aware of this practice, and in many instances they would discharge any employee known to be directly or indirectly associated with the sale of marihuana.

On rare occasions public guides, if properly approached would refer one to a place where the "reeler" could be bought. There was no evidence that the guide received money when acting as go-between. Terminal ports, mainly Negroes, appeared to be more directly connected with the traffic of marihuana. They were more conversant with the subject and it was easier for them to establish contact between purchaser and peddler. Marihuana smoking is very common in the theaters of Harlem according to the observations of the investigators. We have reason to believe that in some instances, perhaps few in number, employees actually sold cigarettes on the premises. In the Harlem dance halls smoking was frequently observed either in the lobbies or on the main floor. The patrons as well as the musicians were regular users of smoking. There was no evidence of sales being made by employees on the premises, or that there was any gain on the part of the owners or employees in pursuing this practice. Whereas the smoking of marihuana was not encouraged, nothing was done to prevent it.

There are specific sections in the Borough of Manhattan where the sale of marihuana cigarettes appears to be localized: 1) the Harlem district; 2) the Broadway area, a little east and west of Broadway and extending from 42nd street to 59th street. While it is true that one may find a cigarette in other districts, it is not as easily obtainable as in the two localities mentioned.

The consensus of marihuana users is that the drug is not harmful and that infrequent or constant use of marihuana does not result in physical or mental deterioration.

The Mental Attitude of the Marihuana Smoker

Most of the smokers of marihuana coming within the scope of our survey were unemployed, and of the most had part-time employment. Occasionally, as well as confirmed, users were all aware of the laws pertaining to the illegal use of the drug. They did not indulge in its use with a spirit of bravado or as a challenge to law as has been reported by some investigators in other districts. They did not express remorse concerning their use of marihuana, nor did they blame this habit as a causative factor in the production of special difficulties in their personal lives. Except for musicians there appeared to be no attempt at self-treatment on the part of the habitual smoker. This attitude is in marked contrast to that usually taken by those addicted to morphine, cocaine, or heroin.

The consensus of marihuana users is that the drug is not harmful and that infrequent or constant use of marihuana does not result in physical or mental deterioration. In describing the most common reaction to the drug they always stated that the desired effect is obtained he cannot be conscious of the quantity he requires to produce that effect, his habit is always associated with "belching." A cold shower will also have the effect of" coming down." It has been found that the use of such beverages as beer, or a sweet soda pop, is an effective measure. Smokers insist that "it does something to the stomach" and that it always associated with "belching." A cold shower will also have the effect of bringing the person "down." Smokers have been unable to confirm the opinion expressed by some investigators that marihuana smoking is the first step in the use of such drugs as cocaine, morphine, and heroin. of sweet wines. It is their contention that this mild alcoholic beverage aids the drug in producing the desired effect. Most marihuana smokers insist that the appetite is increased as the result of smoking.

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