

## **WTE Column of February 25, 2014. Editor's Headline: "Ditch Tobacco, Accept Hemp"**

When I began to teach in Tennessee after having taught in California, I was in for a terrific culture shock. On California campuses, it's uncool to smoke. Even people who light up at home refrain from doing so on campus. In Tennessee, it's the other way around. In 1997 (I think this is true today) some courtyards and quadrangles were entirely devoted to smokers. You'd find professors puffing away alongside students—convinced, no doubt, they were aiding the local economy.

Then I read the essays of students that featured a grandparent or great-grandparent, caregiver in the student's childhood when parents were at work. How the roles had reversed, with the student looking after an oldster debilitated from a lifetime of smoking. Essays spoke of emphysema, of oxygen tanks, of grannies needing assistance to get from couch to toilet.

You'd think living with a human being wrecked through tobacco use would deter youngsters from smoking. Sadly, it doesn't. When you're young, you believe you're invincible—and you're sure that your life won't turn out as shabby as that of your hardscrabble forebears. Besides, Big Brother is subsidizing tobacco growers: their products can't be all bad, right? Sadly, by the time you know better, you're firmly hooked, for the deadly effects of your addiction don't show up until much, much later.

Culture does not unfold discreetly and spontaneously. In modern times it is aided and abetted by persuasive advertising, which, in turn, arises from self-interest. If Big brother had its Southern constituents' wellbeing at heart, it would quit the tobacco subsidies and encourage the growing of hemp. Subsidy decisions, however, are swayed by those who finance elections, entities like Big Tobacco.

State legislators, like youthful student-grandchildren, believe they are smarter than their peers. Worse, they've convinced the voters who elected them. By the time we know better, it's too late. What now? Do we nod in agreement when elected officials spout foolishness?

Recently a House legislative committee rejected a bill, introduced by Rep. James Byrd, D-Cheyenne, that would have eased the penalties for possessing small amounts of marijuana. It would have reversed Wyoming's trend to make criminals of youngsters engaged in activities meant to snub the mindset of their peers.

State law on this issue is as absurd as church-sanctioned torture once was. Rep. Byrd handed out a report from the Wyoming Division of Criminal Investigation that tracked marijuana arrests in the state for the past five years. In 2012, 1,295 adult males and 386 females were arrested. The totals for juveniles were 330 for males and 119 for females. Practically all were for personal possession. Mr. Byrd's measure would have accorded a small civil penalty for possessing small amounts of marijuana.

Rep. Steve Harshman, R-Casper, Chair of the House Appropriations Committee, argued against HB 49, saying he wants to send "the right message" to Wyoming youngsters. Is he saying it's ok to compromise your health by imbibing certain substances, so long as the substances are not

cannabis? Unless this lawmaker has never smoked a cigarette or sipped a cocktail, his “message” is a “Do as a say, don’t do as I do” dictum.

Rep. Mike Greear, R-Worland, concurred, something to the effect that he’d rather see his kids with cigarettes in their pockets than a joint or two. Really?

Just as with tobacco subsidies, state lawmakers’ decisions aren’t based on clear thinking, nor are they the result of good judgment, much as we’d like to believe otherwise. Wyoming males are fond of the solitary, self-reliant type exemplified by Marlboro Man. The Marlboro type, however, is not a cultural icon, it’s a cynical, financed fantasy. Since inception of the ads, no less than five he-man actors who represented Marlboro have succumbed to the effects of smoking.

Big Tobacco was behind the Marlboro ads no less than behind tobacco subsidies down south. Hereabouts, Big Pharma campaigns against medical use of marihuana. Not to be outdone, the petroleum companies so dear to Wyomingites have something at stake in continued criminalization of hemp, namely, petroleum-based plastics. Look around you: plastics everywhere that could be replaced by hemp-based products. Then there’s the for-profit prison system that wants jail terms for civil offenses.

As to the notion that lessening marijuana penalties would play into the hands of drug cartels: While drug addiction is a serious blight on the Wyoming landscape, it’s not because a joint is smoked here and there. Chair Harshman worries about drug cartels? He should look to state-of-the-art meth labs in Mexico, with their ruthless yet deadly-efficient distributing systems. Yes, these systems reach Wyoming and beyond.

“I had a hunch HB49 wouldn’t make it in a budget session,” Rep. Byrd said in conversation with me. “Still, it’s important we begin the discussion.” He wants to avoid, he said, having the issue resolved through a referendum, which would give lawmakers fewer options to regulate. “We’d end up with the same problems we see in Colorado.”

Colorado had approved marijuana for health purposes years ago. Voters got tired of the half-measure and, in 2012, decriminalized recreational use as well.

Wyomingites like me don’t care to smoke, be it tobacco or pot. We want to use our acreage to grow hemp. If that means decriminalizing marijuana, so be it.