

Column: Sick People Need Pot

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Most politicians are prone to strike poses while public servants. And sometimes as they vogue, they actually lead. At other times, they stumble down the runway. To highlight my point, think three simple words: George Walker Bush. The president misled us into invading, then occupying, Iraq and is dead set on keeping us in his misadventure, now with his Hail Mary surge.

It doesn't matter that the vast majority of Americans have decided the costs outweigh the benefits — the president of the United States insists on leading us where few want to follow. In two words, there is Bill Richardson. Unlike Bush, New Mexico Gov. Richardson is following the will of the people. Withstanding strong-arming from the wrong-headed White House, Richardson last week signed into law a bill that stops making criminals out of doctors who dare to follow a sacred concept in the Hippocratic Oath: Do no harm.

The bill, the Compassionate Use of Medical Marijuana Act, allows doctors to prescribe marijuana to relieve seriously ill patients who are in excruciating pain. The law allows New Mexicans with cancer, multiple sclerosis, epilepsy and HIV/AIDS to smoke a little pot to ease their suffering without fearing police or state prison.

In and of itself, the bill Richardson signed is outstanding but not unique. Eleven governors have gone before him. Medical marijuana is already legal in Alaska, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Maine, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont and Washington. These states are leading the federal government in making sure there is no targeting of sick and dying people or the doctors who dare to help them.

It's not necessary to be in an altered state of consciousness to understand why 12 governors are leading the charge for more caring, effective medical marijuana laws. A Time Magazine/CNN Poll conducted in 2002 reported that 80 percent of respondents supported allowing adults to "legally use marijuana for medical purposes."

With that sort of favor, I wonder why some speculate whether Richardson's signing of the bill will hurt his 2008 presidential ambition. Being the first presidential candidate to actually sign a medical marijuana bill gives Richardson at least as much of a positive distinction as the first Mexican American to make a serious bid for leader of the free world. But, political considerations aside, Richardson said he signed it because "it is the right thing to do."

Should a few more Illinois legislators open their hearts and clear their minds, Gov. Rod Blagojevich will get his chance to do the right thing, too. Ten days from now, Sen. John Cullerton (D-Chicago) will bring up Senate Bill 650 in Springfield for yet another vote. Although there is popular support for the measure in Illinois, as in the rest of the nation, Cullerton has not been able to round up enough Republicans and conservative Democrats to get the job done. There is the perception that Cullerton's medical marijuana bill will promote increased drug use -- which borders on being hallucinogenic.

A 1999 U.S. government-sponsored Institutes of Medicine report blew away old beliefs that marijuana serves as a gateway drug. "In fact, most drug users do not begin their drug use with marijuana — they begin with alcohol and nicotine, usually when they are too young to do so legally," the study reported. A compilation of government surveys put together by the Marijuana Policy Project serves up other urban legend-busting facts. There has been a 47 percent decline in ninth-graders reporting marijuana use since California passed the law eight years ago. There has been a 50 percent reduction in use of drugs by sixth-graders since Washington passed the law nine years ago. And, in Hawaii and Nevada, marijuana use by youths has decreased by more than 40 percent since the states passed the law seven years ago.

"This law will provide much-needed relief for New Mexicans suffering from debilitating diseases," Richard said at his bill-signing ceremony. That sentiment is echoed by Cullerton, who said his bill is "just designed to protect these poor people who are ill and don't want to be criminals."

The Illinois state senator isn't sure how healthy this month's vote for the bill will be. But he is sure about this: "It's going to pass. The question is when and how many people have to suffer before it happens."