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Sheila Polk was right. Arizona never should have legalized recreational marijuana

inent Arizona prosecutor warned that legal marijuana would be dangerous. nting nationally that she was right.



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Arizona Republic

Published 6:01 a.m. MT June 18, 2023 | Updated 6:55 p.m. MT June 19, 2023

“Here we go again with another diatribe by Sheila Polk and friends against the legalization of marijuana.”

— **From a letter to the editor, The Arizona Republic, April 5, 2016**

She was the lightning rod of the marijuana debate in Arizona.

The fussbudget who warned that America’s march to legalizing recreational pot would court real trouble.

She said we would popularize a drug that had become far more potent than the 1990s marijuana that Bill Clinton never inhaled.

And she said this new and more dangerous cannabis would pose a unique threat to young people.

Sheila Polk was right. We were fools

While supporters crowed that legalization would finally crush the marijuana black market, she pushed back. To the contrary, she said, the black market will thrive.

The year was 2016, and Sheila Polk, then the Yavapai County attorney, had become the most visible leader of the state's anti-legalization movement.

She was the killjoy at the garden party. The castor oil in the punch bowl.

She was the most obstinate and annoying barrier between Arizonans and their party weed.

And now it turns out, she was right.

We were fools to legalize marijuana.

Legal weed is not what we thought

The evidence has been building nationally that not only is marijuana far more dangerous than Americans understood, but that it may, in fact, be impossible to legalize, whether we want to or not.

In California, for instance, legalization has created the largest black market for the drug that state has ever known, leading to highly potent and unregulated cannabis that undercuts the legal market and the expected windfall in legal-cannabis tax revenues, according to the Los Angeles Times.

New York Times columnist Ross Douthat, in a May 17 column headlined "Legalizing Marijuana Is a Big Mistake," surveyed the gathering evidence that legal cannabis is fraught with serious problems, and concluded:

"Marijuana legalization as we've done it so far has been a policy failure, a potential social disaster, a clear and evident mistake."

Among the problems he cited:

- The sharp rise in "marijuana use disorder." The people who have gone from casual cannabis consumption to daily use has risen to 16.3 million Americans, according to the 2021 Survey on National Drug Use and Health.
- The link between that habitual pot use and schizophrenia is growing among young men, as outlined in a new study by the National Institutes of Health.

- The gathering evidence that “legal medical marijuana, particularly when available through retail dispensaries, is associated with higher opioid mortality,” according to a new paper published in the Journal of Health Economics.

Cartels are growing black-market marijuana

But it was groundbreaking reporting in September by the Los Angeles Times and reporter Paige St. John that analyzed satellite imagery to show that legalization has “triggered a surge in illegal cannabis on a scale California has never before witnessed.”

The rise in new black-market marijuana grows is so vast and easily moveable it is virtually impossible to enforce.

“It’s like taking on a gargantuan army with a pocket knife,” Mendocino County (Calif.) Sheriff Matt Kendall told The Times.

St. John reported that “Outlaw grows have exacerbated cannabis-related violence, bringing shootouts, robberies, kidnappings and, occasionally, killings. Some surrounded residents say they are afraid to venture onto their own properties.”

Mexican cartels have moved aggressively into California, setting up growing operations in the state that spare them the risk and expense of transporting pot across the border.

Criminals are terrorizing parts of California

Siskiyou County (Calif.) Sheriff Jeremiah LaRue tells the harrowing story of how he was investigating illegal grows with one of his sergeants when roughly 200 people surrounded them.

A man came up to them and told them, “You don’t belong here. You need to leave.”

That was on a public street, not private property, in his northern California county on the Oregon border, LaRue told the YouTube program “California Insider.”

The fear is palpable, Jorge Ventura, reporter and producer of the documentary “Narcoformia,” told California Insider. “Throughout my whole experience, I’ve covered the

border, I go into Mexico. I covered the crime and cartel stuff.

“But never has an elected official in the United States backed off on interview with me because they actually were threatened by that group. This is happening in the United States. It’s absurd.”

Polk tried to warn of the dangers

Recently I talked to Sheila Polk, now retired, about the cartels.

She said, “That’s one of the ... things we tried to talk about and raise public awareness about, that this was an invitation for cartels to operate within our border rather than outside our borders.

“And the evidence is stronger than ever that that is exactly what has happened.”

Busted for selling pot? Some can get their records expunged

No matter how Arizona regulates its marijuana market, it’s not going to escape many of these national trends.

We have yet to see the kind of black market that grips California, but the temptation is high, said Maricopa County Sheriff’s Detective Matthew Shay to Phoenix 3TV/CBS 5. “With the prices of the illegal, black market marijuana cannabis you can get, from say California, and then import into metro Phoenix, it’s very enticing to operate an illegal dispensary op. You can make a lot of money, you don’t have to pay the taxes the dispensary has to. You’re not burdened by the all the regulations ... normal dispensaries have to go through.”

Our state’s climate is less hospitable to marijuana cultivation, and has far fewer people, so we’re not going to see anything on the scale of California’s illicit market, but as with anything in California, we’ll feel its reverberations.

On the health front the story is mixed. Teen use declined in Arizona, but we’re seeing an increase in more children accidentally ingesting marijuana edibles. Banner Poison and Drug Information Center reported it got 300 calls in Maricopa County in 2022, an increase of 50 calls from the year before, reports KTAR.

“That steady increase is getting close to almost a call a day, and we have just seen those numbers continue to rise year over year,” said the center’s Managing Director Maureen Roland.

Polk lost her battle with the proponents of legalization in Arizona. After defeating a ballot measure in 2016, she lost in 2020 when Arizonans passed a similar measure to legalize cannabis, making ours the 12th state to do so.

Today 23 states and the District of Columbia have legalized recreational marijuana.

Legal weed is as popular as ever as 68% of Americans say they support it, according to a Gallup poll taken in October.

Arizona is unlikely to walk back legalization

For states such as Arizona, we are unlikely to turn back, Polk said.

“I feel like it’s futile, and I hate to say that publicly because, you know, I was such an opponent and worked so hard to fight legalization. But ... the number of foot soldiers for the legalization industry that are out there, they’re very numerous, very strong, very well-funded, and the march across the United States is just happening, and I don’t see that there would ever be a will to try to fight back and unravel what has happened already.”

Polk says she will continue to work on the prevention side of drug use through MATFORCE, a nonprofit coalition created in 2006 to reduce substance abuse in Yavapai County.

“Parents really need to understand the importance now more than ever about marijuana use. Marijuana is much more potent than it was.”

I asked her what her lessons learned are from the growing number of studies and national writers pointing to the perils of legal pot.

“Lessons learned?” she asked. “I’m not sure how to articulate ‘I told you so.’”

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