OP-ED

Child-proofing pot

By David Sack

In states where medical and recreational cannabis sales are allowed, disquieting new trends and statistics are proving its unique dangers for those most vulnerable to its effects: children.

One such statistic is a spike in calls to poison control centers. According to the National Poison Data System, calls about accidental ingestion of marijuana in children 9 and younger more than tripled in states that decriminalized marijuana before 2005. In states that enacted legalization from 2005 to 2011, calls increased nearly 11.5% per year. Over the same period in states without decriminalization laws, the call rate stayed the same. In the decriminalized states, such calls were also more likely to result in critical-care admissions. Neurological effects were the most common.

These findings led the study's authors to recommend warning labels and child-resistant packaging, especially for edible marijuana products that resemble candy.

Candy? Yes, in medical dispensaries, marijuana-infused fudge, gelato, gummi candies and hard candies are just a few of the offerings. And remember, the pot used in a 1970s-era brownie was a lot less potent than today's pot, which in some samples has been found to have triple the amount of THC, its psychoactive ingredient, compared with 50 years ago.

A University of Colorado study blamed the proliferation of these drug-laced edibles, combined with relaxed marijuana laws, for a surge in emergency room visits by children who had accidentally ingested marijuana.

"Before the marijuana boom these kinds of edibles were not mass-produced and the amount of THC ingested was somewhat limited," said Dr. George Wang, lead study author, upon the report's release. "But now we are seeing much higher strength marijuana."

Increased legalization also means easier access for adolescents. In a study of Colorado teens in substance-abuse treatment centers, for example, 74% said they had gotten marijuana from someone who qualified for it medically. Researchers call it diversion.

Legalization may also be encouraging more kids to consider trying marijuana. In a recent study of thousands of high school seniors, 10% of nonusers said they would try marijuana if the drug were legal in their state. This included large subgroups of students normally at low risk, including non-cigarette smokers, those with strong religious affiliations and those with friends who disapprove of drugs. And of the students already using marijuana? Eighteen percent said they would use more under legalization.

Kids are hearing that marijuana is no big deal. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Whatever is intended by legalization, children seem to be hearing this: Marijuana is no big deal. But especially for the young, nothing could be further from the truth. Here's a review of marijuana's negative effects on developing brains and bodies:

■ Marijuana damages developing brains. Adolescence is a particularly vulnerable time for the brain, which continues developing well into the 20s. Marijuana can disrupt the process, meaning the brain may not form normally. At particular risk are chronic users. One study found that teens who smoked marijuana daily for about three years performed poorly on memory tasks — and this was two years after they had stopped use. Memory-related structures in the brain appeared to shrink and collapse inward, and the younger the smokers were when they began chronic use, the more abnormally the brain regions were shaped.

■ Marijuana is linked to mental health problems. The National Institute on Drug Abuse warns that there are now "sufficient data" to show that for those predisposed to schizophrenia, marijuana may trigger its onset and possibly intensify the symptoms. It has also been linked to increased depression and suicidal thoughts.

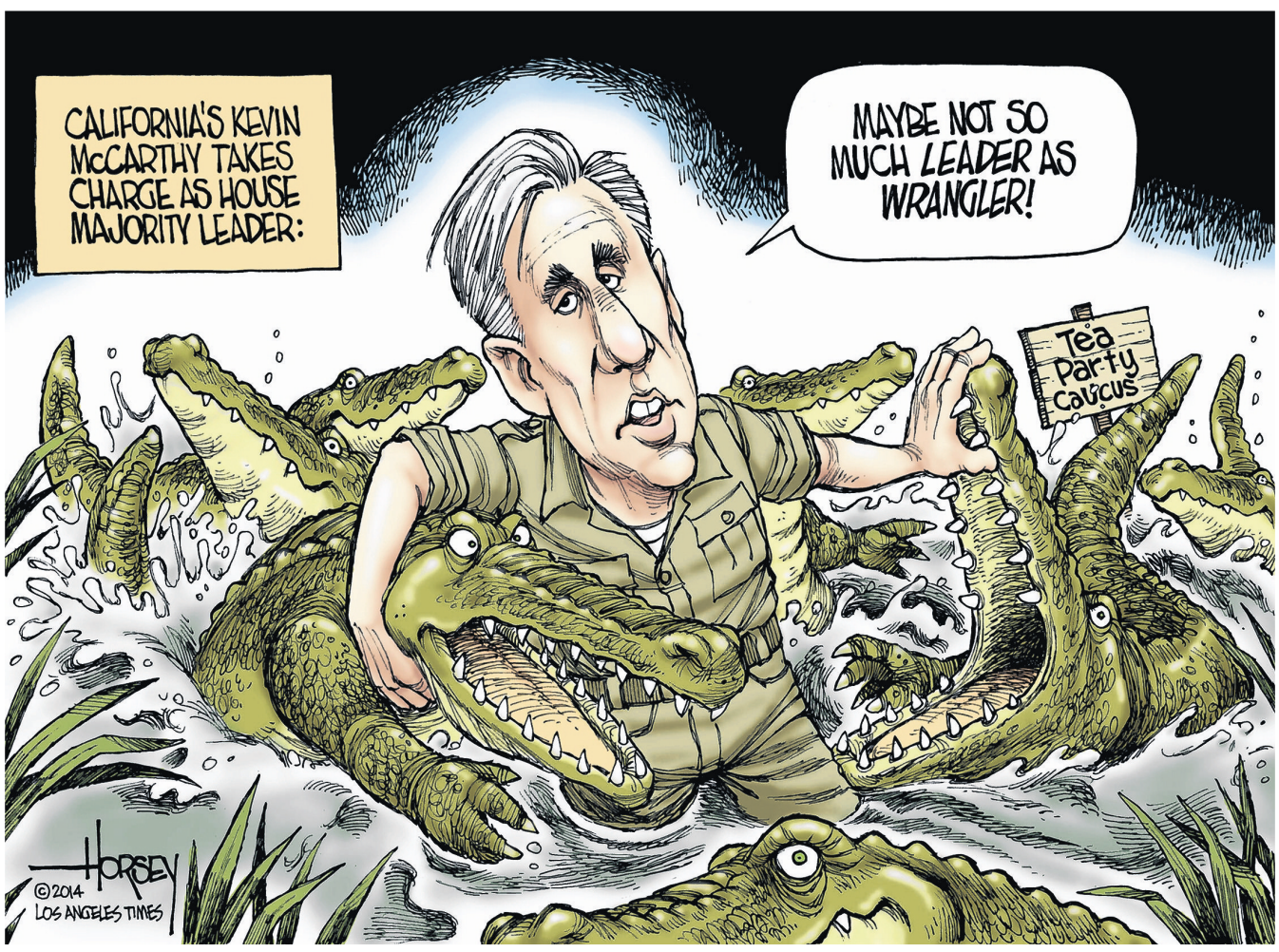
■ Marijuana sets up kids for failure. We give children one overriding task: to learn. Introducing a substance that slows reaction time, distorts judgment and interferes with memory short-circuits that task. In addition, the younger kids are when they try marijuana, the more likely they are to become addicted (yes, marijuana can be addictive) and the more likely they are to go on to use other drugs. One analysis by Columbia University researchers found that teens who had used marijuana at least once in the previous 30 days were almost 26 times more likely than those who never used marijuana to try other drugs such as cocaine, heroin, methamphetamines, LSD or Ecstasy.

It may be too late to stem the rush toward legalization of recreational marijuana use and the proliferation of products that comes with it. Instead, we need to focus on better ways to protect children, combat the notion that marijuana is harmless and fund the much-needed additional research on medical uses for marijuana's chemical components, such as the promising cannabidiol, which may prove effective without producing a high. Controlled scientific studies, after all, should be deciding marijuana's potential legitimacy as a medicine.

Legal or not, for the most vulnerable among us — our kids — marijuana is the opposite of no big deal.

Dr. David Sack is board certified in psychiatry, addiction psychiatry and addiction medicine. He is chief executive of Elements Behavioral Health, a network of mental health and addiction treatment centers that includes adolescent and young adult rehab programs.

DAVID HORSEY



David Horsey Los Angeles Times

When soccer met Prop. 187

A sea of Mexican flags at a 1994 U.S.-Mexico match in the Rose Bowl helped fuel a backlash.

By Rick Cole

It's no coincidence that we're observing the 20th anniversaries of the last time the World Cup was played in the United States and of the passage of Proposition 187, the initiative enacted by California voters to withhold public services to anyone in the country illegally. In fact, they are inextricably connected. The days when "the world came to the Rose Bowl" for soccer helped fuel the xenophobic backlash that ensured passage of the controversial measure with nearly 60% of the vote.

With the U.S. team advancing further in the World Cup this year than many had expected, global soccer has finally gone mainstream in America. However, in 1994, the audience for the finals in Pasadena was largely confined to international visitors, American Youth Soccer Organization families and immigrants from nations where soccer is as central to national identity as football is to the United States.

In June of that year, on the eve of World Cup competition, nearly 100,000 fans crowded into the Rose Bowl to watch an exhibition game featuring the United States' team and Mexico's national team. The vast majority of the friendly fans were rooting for the Mexican team. I was there, and the Rose Bowl was awash in red, white and green Mexican flags.

It was not a stellar year for the Mexican team. It fell to the U.S., 1-0, in that match, then lost three games and did not make it to the quarterfinals of the World Cup. But those waving Mexican flags would play a crucial role in how the debate over Proposition 187 played out.

The anti-immigrant initiative was a poorly drafted product of a fringe group. The petition drive was launched by an unemployed accountant, who claimed he'd been cheated in a business deal by an illegal immigrant (from Canada), and a former police crime analyst who said she was galvanized by a visit to a social services agency where she walked into "this monstrous room full of people, babies and little children all over the place, and I realized nobody was speaking English."

Proposition 187 would never had qualified for the ballot without the brazen opportunism of then-Gov. Pete Wilson. Trailing challenger Kathleen Brown in early polls during his reelection campaign, Wilson threw his support behind the measure.

At the time, California had taken a hard fall in the final days of the George H.W. Bush administration. A real estate bubble had burst, and the end of the Cold War brought devastation to the local aerospace industry. The riots over the verdict in the Rodney King beating case, gang violence and a series of natural disasters cast a long shadow over the California dream. Voters were in an angry mood, and whether their hostility would focus on the incumbent Republican governor or faceless Mexican immigrants was an open question.

Wilson, an otherwise bland moderate, calculated that the numbers were on his side if voters were pitted against disenfranchised immigrants. He ignored the outrage over the initiative from religious and civic leaders, and the overwhelming verdict of newspaper editorial writers.

Brown courageously staked her campaign on opposing Proposition 187. Yet if there was any hope of turning the tide, it disappeared when thousands of angry Latino students took to the streets in protest. They were carrying hundreds of Mexican flags (and a scattering of American ones). The Mexican tricolors were branded by proponents of 187 as indelible proof that these youths constituted a foreign invasion.

Of course, I believe most of those flags had been acquired months before by soccer fans, not die-hard Mexican nationalists. Voters reacted viscerally to a misinterpreted symbol. Their emotions were manipulated by the political agenda of supposed patriots. Wilson and his far-right allies waved the American flag while they turned their back on the Statue of Liberty. Nowadays, immigration reform rallies are flooded with U.S. flags, carried by those seeking overdue equal justice.

California is a different state today. You can wear a colorful soccer jersey, wave a flag and cheer for Brazil, Italy or Mexico without censure — unless they are playing the American squad. The world has come back to the land of the Rose Bowl, and this time it's genuinely welcome.

Rick Cole, deputy mayor for budget and innovation for the city of Los Angeles, was mayor of Pasadena in 1994.

What's in a political name?

RONALD BROWNSTEIN

The paradox of a possible 2016 presidential race between Hillary Rodham Clinton and Jeb Bush is that each would be seeking to lead a party that has largely abandoned the policies associated with their family names.

As candidates, each would inherit enormous advantages in fundraising, organization and name identification from the networks of supporters tied to their families. But each would also bear the burden of defending political and policy traditions that have dimmed in their party since Bill Clinton and George W. Bush held the White House.

The combination of a shifting electoral coalition, stormier economic climate and growing congressional polarization has led each side away from the centrism that Clinton consistently, and Bush intermittently, pursued. Each party today mostly follows the portion of each man's agenda that reaffirmed its traditional priorities. Democrats from President Obama on down still echo Clinton's emphasis on investing in human capital and "making work pay." Republicans reprise Bush's push for tax cuts, less regulation and entitlement reform.

But each party has deemphasized, or even interred, many of the new approaches the two presidents advanced to court new constituencies. Particularly in his 2000 campaign and early White House years, Bush sought to expand the GOP's reach with his agenda of "compassionate conservatism." Though that reform message was eventually subsumed by the escalating partisan struggle over the Iraq war, Bush broke from Republican orthodoxy to support a stronger federal role in education, immigration reform that included a pathway to citizenship, more federal support for faith-based charities and the creation of a Medicare prescription-drug benefit.

Today, many Republicans have renounced those positions. Indeed, the tea-party movement began coalescing during Bush's second term as a back-to-basics backlash against his "big-government conservatism."

"Because President Bush was very solid from the base's perspectives on taxes and the culture of life, that allowed him to initially reach out on some other issues where they weren't enthusiastic, like immigration and education," notes Peter Wehner, a former senior Bush White House strategist. "When events began to go south for him in the second term ... some of those things they began to rebel against."

That rebellion has raged hottest against the policy that ultimately stamped Bush's tenure above all: nation-building through military force in Afghanistan and Iraq. Traditional Republican hawks still defend those choices. But disillusionment with those interventions has vastly enlarged the audience inside the GOP for critics such as Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.), who this week again excoriated Bush's decision to invade Iraq.

Even while celebrating his economic record, Democrats have likewise downplayed many of Clinton's signature "New Democrat" ideas. Obama has stressed budget discipline or government reform much less, and while he's upheld Clinton's backing for free trade, that idea has faded further among legislative Democrats. The party has moved even more decisively away from Clinton's support for financial deregulation and receptivity to deploying military force.

Most emphatically, Obama has led Democrats toward an unswerving cultural liberalism on issues such as gay marriage that contrasts with Clinton's efforts to reassure socially conservative voters through actions like signing the Defense of Marriage Act.

On both sides, these shifts have been driven partly by events (the financial crash and discontent over the Iraq war). But they also reflect changes in each party's electoral coalition and strategy. Much of Clinton's agenda was focused on holding culturally conservative blue-collar and older whites. But, like an iceberg shearing away, that conservative end of the Democratic coalition has broken off and moved decisively toward the GOP; Democrats have replaced them with growing populations of more reliably liberal minorities and millennials.

While noncollege whites supplied nearly half of Clinton's total 1992 vote, they provided only one-fourth of Obama's 2012 support. Self-identified liberals represented just one-third of Clinton's supporters, but 43% of Obama's. These intertwined shifts have allowed — even required — Democrats to pursue a more uniformly liberal agenda, particularly on social issues.

The GOP, meanwhile, has grown more conservative, anti-Washington and populist. As the Pew Research Center recently reported, the share of Republicans who take consistently conservative positions has spiked from one-third in 1999 to more than half today.

Hillary Clinton (on fiscal discipline and military force) and Jeb Bush (on immigration and Common Core educational standards) have already signaled their desire to tilt their party back toward some of the approaches their families championed. Through their strong personal appeal, each might succeed in places.

But as candidates, each could face more pressure than they now expect to prove that they will fairly reflect their party's new alignment — and are not just seeking to reinstate a fallen family regime.

Ronald Brownstein is a senior writer at the National Journal.
rbrownstein@nationaljournal.com