

# The *mellow high* and the *psychedelic war*: The Rise of Marijuana, the (Counter)-Culture of Dissidence, and the Fall of the American Army in the Vietnam War

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*This paper looks at how marijuana operates as a symbol of dissidence and an idiom of counter-culture in America in the 1960s and 1970s. At the onset of the Vietnam War, when the nation was sharply polarized, the strengthening of anti-drug laws under President Nixon's rule reduced marijuana to an excuse to prosecute whoever disagreed with the state apparatus. The use of drugs, especially marijuana, also became a means to leave the battlefield in one piece, if not a strategy to avoid flying to Vietnam at the first place. Through three war memoirs – Things They Carried, Passing Time, and Busted – produced respectively by Vietnam veterans Tim O'Brien and W.D. Ehrhart, the cultural history of marijuana is tracked in light of the social, medical, and psychological studies conducted on marijuana around that time. It is argued that the soldier's docile body, as Foucault explains, becomes a site of resistance against the war-mongering government with the consumption of cannabis. Ehrhart's Busted, a sequel to Passing Time, directly addresses this conflict between war machinery and individual agency, as the biographical narrative traces the author's nuanced encounter with the law after being caught red-handed in possession of marijuana. This paper understands the Vietnam War as a psychedelic experience by studying the use of cannabis on the battlefield through O'Brien's and Ehrhart's memoirs. Subsequently, by bringing into account the drug laws of that period, it explains why and how marijuana, intrinsically related to the anti-war movements of that time, became a prominent symbol of peace, fraternity, freedom, and co-existence, as opposed to the lethal propaganda perpetuated through the recurrent images of napalm, helicopters, and destruction. Statistically tracking the rise and fall of marijuana use throughout the War and beyond, the paper concludes by commenting on how both of Nixon's advances, against Vietnam and marijuana, miserably failed.*

**Keywords:** Drugs, War, Counter-culture, Resistance, Body

## Stoners in Combat: An Introduction

*In order not to feel  
Time's horrid fardel  
bruise your shoulders,  
grinding you into the earth,  
get drunk and stay that way.  
On what?  
On wine, poetry, virtue, whatever.  
But get drunk.*

~ Charles Baudelaire, *Get Drunk*

Charles Baudelaire did not live long enough to anticipate that his advice would be put into action by thousands of American soldiers crusading their way through the devastated flora of a war-infected Vietnam with the weight of national duty bruising their shoulders<sup>1</sup>. Most of

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those in action were either teenagers or in their twenties. Their coming of age was shaped by President Kennedy's seminal inaugural address: 'ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country' (Kennedy, 2005). Such a nationalist rhetoric influenced several young men in their formative years to unquestioningly join the army. The McCarthy witch-hunt, which characterized public opinion in the fifties, also succeeded in infusing fear and hatred of the threat of communism in these young men. Apart from these reasons, they had neither conviction, nor reason, to participate in a war against an unknown race in an unknown place thousands of miles away from their homes. While William Daniel Ehrhart, the author of the memoirs – *Passing Time* and *Busted* – was disillusioned with the war soon after being introduced to its horrors first-hand, Tim O'Brien, who narrated his experiences in *Things They Carried*, was from the very beginning reluctant to be a part of what seemed to him an immoral and unjust war. But the clarion call of duty could not be done away with. As they came to terms with the unexpected approaches of the Vietnamese army – that seemed visually indistinguishable from innocent civilians – these men in the platoons succumbed to smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, and consuming tranquilizers among other addictive substances in order to negotiate the ongoing trauma brought about by the war. Although the consumption of alcohol was nothing new in the regiments, the extensive use of illegal drugs, in this case, marijuana, distinguishes the Vietnam War. In his memoirs, Ehrhart tries to draw a parallel between the nation's political climate at that time with the alarming rise in the consumption of marijuana. As he writes in *Busted*, the sequel to *Passing Time*, the advent of the 'weed age' happened because, 'the generals kept yakking, and the politicians kept yakking, and the bodies kept piling higher, and there was not enough whiskey in the world to wash away the evil' (1995b, p.14). My paper works upon the link between the rise of the consumption of marijuana and the fall of America in the Vietnam War to observe how this legally-prohibited drug emerged as an object of dissidence and a symbol of peace against the war-mongering state apparatus.

The use and abuse of marijuana was simultaneously an aide in enduring the horrors of the war, and an essential component of anti-war counter-culture. Fresh green cannabis was easy to obtain in the tropical marshlands of Vietnam. MD Stanton notes that by the fall of 1970, almost 69% of army-enlisted personnel regularly engaged in drugs (1976, p.560). While 41% of them brought this habit to Vietnam from the USA, the remaining 28% were introduced to it on the battlefield. Stanton argues that such an alarming number of drug users within the army was a direct result of the anti-war counter-cultural movements that thrived on the intake of psychedelic drugs. At the same time, his study also maintains that the same section of army personnel who indulged in such forbidden pleasures, also refused to associate themselves with the counter-cultural trends of the 1960s (1976, p.563). The growing insurgency of 'potheads' inside the army and beyond persuaded President Nixon to initiate a War against Drugs in 1971 – 'dope became America's 'public enemy number one' (Vulliamy, 2011).

The war against drugs, as Stanton notes, soon manifested itself within the regiments. Drug abuse among the soldiers was earlier either overlooked or forgiven as long as they got their duties right. But the alarming rise in those resorting to the nation's 'public enemy number one' called for measures to be adapted to cleanse the platoons of marijuana and cocaine use (1976, p.559). In 1969, as per the army's Criminal Investigation Division's report, 75% of the 'major cases' were marijuana-related offenses – most commonly, the possession of it (1976,

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Glasgow on 14<sup>th</sup> June, 2016. I am grateful the scholars and faculty members, especially Prof. Nigel Leask and Marine Furet, for their encouraging reception of my paper.

p.561). In 1970, an official regulation under the title *Drug Abuse: Prevention and Control* was passed. This regulation had a two-fold agenda. Firstly, it aimed at investigating drug abuse among military personnel. Secondly, it sought to treat the victims of it with amnesty and rehabilitation. These programs, Stanton believes, proved inefficient (1976, p.563). Simultaneously, drug addiction became a means to either avoid going to Vietnam in the first place or to secure a ticket back to America in one piece. By the spring of 1971, as many as 16,000 servicemen had been discharged from service in Vietnam for drug abuse (1976, p.564). The increase in regulations and surveillance cut down the number of smokers in 1970, but marijuana was soon replaced by heroin. Given its relative cheapness, easy availability in its purest form, and mostly importantly, for being convenient to hide, heroin was particularly attractive to the US soldiers. Its consumption assumed epidemic proportions in 1970 and lasted for at least six months within the army (Stanton 1976, p.561-62). The persistent use of marijuana was arguably a combined outcome of the failure of the Narcotics Bureau along with the growing popularity of the narrative of counter-culture that endorsed drugs as means to attain spiritual and political freedom.

It is, therefore, necessary to interrogate how marijuana linked these counter-cultural trends with the martial experiences of the veterans in Vietnam. Among other illicit substances, marijuana recurs as a constant trope throughout the body of Vietnam War literature – the social, political, and cultural ramifications of its representation need to be analyzed to understand the ways in which it negotiated the horror of being in the war. Tracking the cultural history of this psychotropic drug predominantly through three war memoirs, *Things They Carried*, *Passing Time*, and *Busted*, and in the light of the social, medical, and psychological studies conducted around that time, I argue that marijuana operated as means of consolidating the anti-war sentiments harbored by the Vietnam War veterans into a thorough critique against the state. Marijuana, in turn, threatened to dismantle the monolithic narratives generated by the American power structure to sustain the myth of political unity in an era of internal and external turmoil.

### **‘Nice’ and ‘Mellow’ High: Weed and the War**

Ted Lavender, a fictional counterpart of one of Tim O’Brien’s actual comrade in arms, was a nervous soldier in the Alpha Company who carried tranquilizers and almost seven ounces of ‘dope’ – a ‘necessity’ (1990, p.3) – to the war. Like the Chef who also smoked marijuana in Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979), he adopted a puppy and fed it out of his own spoon before it was accidentally killed. O’Brien devotes a paragraph in the chapter, *Spin*, to describe him:

Like when Ted Lavender went too heavy on the tranquilizers. “How’s the war today?” somebody would say, and Ted Lavender would give a soft, spacey smile and say, “Mellow man. We got ourselves a nice mellow war today” (1990, p.31-32).

By using ‘nice’ and ‘mellow’, Lavender seems to reflect on the aesthetic experience of the trip alongside the niceness and mellowness of not having to fall in trouble or die, in other words, survive. The effect of drugs on Lavender evidently made him trivialize the gory reality around him. It became a psychedelic journey that the narrator chose to pass by. But to Ted, it was a journey that ended with his sudden and painless death. Lavender was shot in the head while he was returning after relieving himself. Moments before going out, he had taken a tranquilizer. All the thirty-four rounds of ammunition weighing twenty pounds that he had with himself

could not save his life as he did not get a chance to retaliate. His army comrades used his poncho to wrap his body before carrying him across the paddy to lift him into the helicopter that took him away. While waiting for the helicopter his comrades smoked the marijuana he had been carrying and mourned his death by sharing jokes and stories about him. They remarked, 'how the poor guy didn't feel a thing, how incredibly *tranquil* he was' (1990, p.19, emphasis mine).

Other than getting the marine accustomed to the war by being a mode of normalizing the violence, marijuana, in *Things They Carried*, operates as a medium that reduces the trauma of witnessing a friend's unexpected death. Sharing the dead man's marijuana can be read as a metaphor of the transmission of one man's habit into a larger collective; Lavender's friends became partners in his guilty pleasure. Marijuana, in my opinion, manages to carve out what I would call a homo-social space where unity between different members of the platoon is forged by disassociating death from its terrors. The army personnel comprising a motley crowd had among them a sizable proportion of volunteers who, like Gomer Pyle in Stanley Kubrik's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), were not 'man enough' to endure the war to such an extent that they developed psychological complications. Lavender, whose portrayal is constructed out of his sheer shakiness and fear, needed his dose of stimulants to bring his mind and sinew together. While the minor role that Lavender performs is that of the stock character of a junkie, the fact that his drug use is shared by his companions after his demise, I conclude, illuminates how his method of dealing with war is not just his own, but a collective phenomenon drawing participation from the entire unit.

Indulging in drug abuse opposes the structure of power at the site of war through an attempt to liberate the soldier from the discipline enforced on him. Michel Foucault presents us with the stereotype of the seventeenth century soldier to illustrate how a human body on joining the army enters a 'machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down, and rearranges it' (1995, p.138). Military discipline functions in producing what Foucault defines as the subjected and practised 'docile body' (1995, p.138). Such a body comes into being with the generation of a 'political anatomy' and a 'mechanics of power' (1995, p.138). Foucault observes that 'disciplinary coercion establishes in the body the constricting link between an increased aptitude and an increased dominion' (1995, p.138). Hence, the soldier's body does not belong to him but is handed over to the authority that commands him – it is chiselled out of the apparatus of power that takes over it to perpetuate a certain ideology. The personal pleasure of smoking up destabilizes the political anatomy of the soldier's body by compelling it to transgress and enter a surreal and hyper-real space outside the control of the authorities. In *Things They Carried*, O'Brien opens by providing an elaborate list of arms and equipment the soldier carried to the war. His body is trained to attain physical prowess. The marine is subjected to a public asexual life and is not even allowed to die without the command of his superior. His masculinity is configured to be a mobile depository that stores the enormous amount of weight of the objects needed to survive the war. He is defined by the objects<sup>2</sup> that he carries; his identity is shaped by the synthesis of his personal objects of preference and the general objects of order. The consumption of a forbidden substance like marijuana is therefore

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<sup>2</sup> In the opening chapter (p.1-15) of *Things They Carried*, O'Brien provides an elaborate list of the objects the characters carried to the war. Apart from carrying the heavy arms and ammunitions prescribed to one as per his rank, the soldiers were also allowed to carry some objects of personal value and preference. The body that carried both guns and drugs was at once obeying and disobeying the codes of command.

a threat against the very act of disciplining, a strike at the roots of the code of conduct. Smoking up is an act of private meditation and simultaneously a political transgression. The collective intake of marijuana, unlike alcohol that fuelled violence, therefore, was perceived antagonistic to the spirit of the war and drew the wrath of the high command.

### **Passing Time: A Doper's Diary During and After the War**

While the representation of marijuana in *Things They Carried* relies solely on the brief characterization of Ted Lavender and the subsequent marijuana party after his death, *Passing Time*, written in first person narration, unpacks the authentic experience of a stoner in the war. In chapter five, Ehrhart recounts to his friend Bart over a joint,

Oh yeah. Good stuff over there. Right off the vine. And cheap, too. It just grows there, like dandelions, Old mama-sans used to walk around all the time with big fat joints hanging out of their mouths... ..Stoned out mama-sans... ..I guess that's the only way they could cope with all the bullshit going down (1995b, p.22).

Ehrhart seems to define marijuana as a crop that is intrinsically connected with the tropical terrains of Vietnam. Unlike, in the USA, there were neither prohibitions nor taboos. Furthermore, the drug revolution was not entirely a youth phenomenon; the Vietnamese *mama-sans*<sup>3</sup> normalized the use of this herb in the public space. But unlike the Vietnamese, Ehrhart's own encounter with marijuana during combat was in conditions far from recreational. A paragraph later, he recalls:

I didn't tell Bart that I'd only smoked a half-dozen times or so in the previous two years. A few times up at Con Thien, that barren rain swept hump of mud up on the demilitarized zone where we'd live in holes with the rats for thirty three days while the North Vietnamese gunners used us for target practice and there was nothing you could do but sit there and wait and hope they didn't put one right down your pipe.

[...]

And once just the previous summer in Perkasio, sitting around with a couple of friends who'd seemed to have grown so distant from me that it was hard to believe we had ever known each other before, let alone grown up together, and we'd smoked from a pipe made out of a real rifle, the bowl in the breech, puffing through the barrel the same way Calloway had put his mouth over that forty-five, and they had left for peace and love in Woodstock and I'd left America for the third time in less than two years..." (1995a, p.22-23).

Ehrhart's own acquaintance with cannabis occurs at a precarious moment between life and death. Cannabis functions as a substance that enables the marines to deal with the fear of dying at any moment. It also forges tactical unity between subjects of varying socio-political configurations. Vietnam sharply polarized American youth; the war alienated thousands of veterans, such as Ehrhart, from the familiar ethos of the America they were brought up in. Their idea of home was dismantled by an uncertain exile to the battleground. While most of them dreaded the thought of staying in Vietnam, re-adapting to their earlier lifestyles was also not possible. In such a moment of painful unfamiliarity, marijuana served as a provisional way to deal with psychological complications by numbing their senses. The subversive use of the rifle

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<sup>3</sup> Mama-sans is American slang for East Asian women in positions of authority, commonly used to denote female owners of geisha houses or bars.

as a device to bring together old lost friends rather than functioning as a killing machine suggests how cannabis figuratively becomes an antithesis, an adversary to combat. Such a *shot* gun<sup>4</sup> forges a symbolic unity between the countercultural wave that resented the war and the veterans who fought it.



**Figure 1** Unknown American soldier in *Grass*. Dir. Ron Mann. Sphinx Productions.

Irving Ginsberg and James Greenley chart four theories to rationalize the use of marijuana. The reference group theory argues that using marijuana occurs because of belonging to a peer group that consumes it (1976, p.24). The commitment or control theory proposes that the intake of marijuana and other socially and legally prohibited substances happens due to a lack of faith or nonconformity in the establishment (Ginsberg & Greenley 1976, p.24). The stress theory sees the consumption of marijuana as an outcome of—rather than a mode of escape from—psychological disorders (Ginsberg & Greenley 1976, p.24). Finally, involvement theory claims that lack of engagement in duties and responsibilities provides time and instigations to indulge in drug abuse (Ginsberg & Greenley 1976, p.24). While the commitment theory explains why many counter-cultural figures of dissidence took up smoking marijuana, the stress and reference group theories offer crucial insights in understanding what made the veterans prone to drug uses. While on the one hand, drugs filled the absence of a plausible ideological mechanism that would help the soldiers sustain the war, on the other hand, it was claimed that drugs actually enhanced their performance on the battlefield (Stanton 1976, p.567).

B. Bower's study of several psychological surveys concludes that a considerable number of Vietnam veterans experienced behavioural and emotional problems up to fifteen years after the war ended. The problem was more intense with those who unwillingly participated in acts of extreme violence like gang rape and unnecessary assassinations (Bower 1984, p.261). Coping with such acute cases of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder was not easy for them. The use and abuse of drugs among veterans began to increase. Ehrhart reiterates throughout his novels how Vietnam let him down. Having gone there with the expectation of a warm welcome from the civilians, who should have been grateful to the USA for rescuing

<sup>4</sup> I have intended a pun here. The *shot* gun is simultaneously capable of making bullet shots and marijuana shots.

them from the communists, what Ehrhart really encountered was passivity, indifference, and scepticism. Furthermore, the similar appearance of the civilians and the Vietcong made it hard to distinguish between his enemies and allies. As he suggests in his poem *Guerrilla Warfare*, he was forced to kill innocent civilians on the basis of mere suspicion (Ehrhart, 1999). In *Busted*, he also confesses that he was forced to take part in a gang rape. The disillusionment with the war and the state along with the void of being deprived of friends, family, and most importantly, a place to call home find articulation when Ehrhart recollects the impact of Vietnam in changing the lives of those who participated in it. He writes:

I guess everybody that went through Vietnam came out of it differently. It's a hard thing to admit that your own government sucker-punched you. I guess a lot of guys cannot cope with it. Look at all the Vietnam veterans ending up in prisons, ending up as junkies, or suicides, ending up with less-than-honourable discharges. You just can't tell me that somehow my whole generation turned out to be nothing but a bunch of fuck-ups (Ehrhart 1995b, p.143-144).

The Vietnam War, like any other large-scale conflict, reduced the life of a human being to a valueless anonymous entity among a figure of millions. Marijuana helped to liquidate the intensity of the effects brought about because of being compelled to engage in unnecessary violence. Smoking marijuana after the war was simultaneously an escape from reality as well as an engagement with it. While a high offered momentary relief from the circumstances shaped by the war, the growing phenomenon of consuming this drug among veterans and American citizens in general acquired a political idiom that sought to reclaim and transform the reality imposed on them by the masters of the war. Ehrhart's *Passing Time* is a crucial link that connects the use of marijuana during and after the war. Its sequel, *Busted*, demonstrates the consequences of being a 'pot-smoking' veteran.

### **Things They Carried Back to Nixon's America after the War: Marijuana as a Metaphor of Dissidence against the State in *Busted***

The tendency to resort to marijuana use can be explained on the grounds of the effects the drug had on its takers. Marijuana functioned as a natural stress and pain reliever. In his seminal novel, *Junky*, published in 1953, the Beat writer William S. Burroughs devotes a chapter to discarding the myths surrounding the consumption of this herb and notes down its actual physiological and psychological consequences. From his first-hand experience of smoking marijuana on and off for fifteen years, he writes:

In 1937, weed was placed under the Harrison Narcotics Act. Narcotics authorities claim that it is a habit-forming drug, that its use is injurious to mind and body, and that it causes the people who use it to commit crimes. Here are the facts: Weed is positively not habit forming. You can smoke weed for years and you will experience no discomfort if your supply is suddenly cut off. I have seen tea heads in jail and none of them showed withdrawal symptoms. [...] There is less habit to weed than there is to tobacco. Weed does not harm the general health. In fact, most users claim it gives you an appetite and acts as a tonic to the system. [...] Weed does not inspire anyone to commit crimes. I have never seen anyone get nasty under the influence of weed. Tea heads are a sociable lot. [...] I cannot understand why the people who claim weed causes crime do not follow through and demand the outlawing of alcohol. [...] I can definitely say that weed is an aphrodisiac and sex is more enjoyable under the influence of weed than without it. Anyone who has used good weed will verify this statement (Burroughs 2008, p. 15-16).

For its ability to bond people into a ‘sociable lot’ and to evoke amour against the climate of violence and repression, cannabis gradually became a symbol of peace and spiritual enlightenment. In a nation that decided upon sustaining the war through volunteers and bloodshed, it is not difficult to infer why drugs became the ‘public enemy number one’ and why the dissemination of marijuana among youngsters needed to be prohibited.

Ron Mann’s documentary, *Grass* (1999) traces the legal and cultural history of marijuana before, during, and after the Vietnam War. It was originally a ‘poor man’s drug’, cultivated and used mostly by Mexican labourers for recreation. The racial hatred towards this community was articulated by restricting the production of the hemp plant that to them was an economically profitable crop (*Grass*, 1999). The Marijuana Tax Act of 1937 was the first of a series of legal measures to eradicate the drug out of the country. Films like *Reefer Madness*, with the drug tsar Aslinger’s cooperation, were produced to propagate scientifically unsubstantiated facts about marijuana (*Grass*, 1999). Rather than sensitively dealing with the drug problem by probing into why and how a substantial subset an entire generation succumbed to use, the documentary argues that the federal government of the United States tightened the drug laws without proper scientific enquiry or debate (*Grass*, 1999). The severe criminalization of marijuana did not succeed in rehabilitating the veterans. On the top of that, long prison sentences ruined their lives forever. Classifying marijuana with harder stuff like heroin, cocaine, acid, and other chemicals amounted to witch-hunting within the USA and eventually led to the prosecution of thousands of otherwise law-abiding men and women of all ages. In 1969, the Supreme Court verdict abolished the Marijuana Tax Act. In 1973 President [Nixon's Reorganization Plan Number Two](#) advocated for the installation of a single federal agency to implement federal drug laws. Hence, the [Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs](#) (BNDD) and the Office of Drug Abuse Law Enforcement (ODALE) joined hands to form the [Drug Enforcement Administration](#) (DEA) on July 1, 1973 (*Grass*, 1999). In Nixon’s era, these laws were used to harass black people, people with unusual hairstyles, and those with different political views (Gitlin 1987, p.218).

Contrarily, the state of Oregon decriminalized the recreational use of marijuana in 1973 and found a sharp decline in crime rates and state expenditure (*Grass*, 1999). Simultaneously, a series of medical, psychological, social, and statistical studies on drugs were also conducted. The 1974 *White Paper on Drug Abuse*, prepared by the Domestic Council’s drug abuse task force under the commission of the President, advocated for a softened stance on marijuana (Holden 1975, p.190). It was also the time when the Watergate scandal exposed Nixon and compelled him to resign in 1974. The growing popularity and the deep impact of marijuana among vast sections of the population could not be undermined. The deployment of cannabis as an idiom opposing violence was effective in fuelling the anti-war movement. Protesters carried posters with slogans that directly combined the ongoing violence of the war along with the personal right to consume marijuana – ‘Cures not Wars’ or ‘Who am I Hurting’, for example (figures 2 & 3). It was a moment when the USA began to perceive the anti-war movement as a direct threat to its integrity. The Pentagon Papers and the Watergate Scandal that exposed the top leaders of the state as corrupt convinced the common mass and the war-affected veterans that Vietnam was not an innocent mistake, but a carefully orchestrated blunder that brought about unnecessary deaths (Gitlin 1987, p.419). Against the nervous state apparatus and its police, stood a multitude of drug-using, cynical, and argumentative war

veterans and counter-cultural figures that had lost faith in the state and sought to reclaim their right to personal liberties.



**Figure 2** *Grass*. Dir. Ron Mann. Sphinx Productions.



**Figure 3** *Grass*. Dir. Ron Mann. Sphinx Productions

As the intensification of the protests and the increase in the number of arrests for drug cases demonstrate, the federal government began to consider marijuana as the root of all its troubles. Quite plausibly, the Nixon administration thought that tightening laws and imposing legal restrictions would solve the problem. But as Foucault in the *Lost Interview* would argue, continual suppression and repression ends up in generating interest in the object of concern (1971). Furthermore, the alarming number of arrests and crackdowns over a plant that was apparently less detrimental to public health than the legal drugs – tobacco and alcohol – accentuated public opinion in favour of decriminalizing marijuana. Emma Lou Davis observes that neither the taboo nor the fascination with ‘pot’ was met with a suitable investigation that would determine its use or avoidance. She explains,

We adhere to two points of view, often characterizing different aspects of the same individual or community. These are the “nobody's gonna tell me what to do” (inherited from our frontier past) and the “destroy evil” from our witchburning past (a far less realistic, more medieval mystique). We must have a witch to burn (Davis 1968, p.1061).

Therefore, marijuana – the new witch after communism that America constructed to hunt down – was initially treated with prejudice by a jingoistic power structure. But subsequently, it brewed newer meanings with the increase in use and the inevitable attempts to restrict it.

Ehrhart’s *Busted*, subtitled *A Vietnam Veteran in Nixon’s America*, precisely contributes to the discourse about these Vietnam years. It records the conflict between the state and marijuana by presenting the author’s personal narrative of being removed from his job as a sailor as a result of possession of marijuana. Mark Herbele argues: ‘By combining an account of Ehrhart’s prosecution with comments on Nixon’s, the book passionately and slyly invites us to compare the crimes of the pot-smoking, working class, antiwar-veteran dropout with those of the architect of Vietnamization, the invasion of Cambodia, and the Christmas bombing’ (1997, p.182). In this memoir, marijuana is both a metaphor of peace, and, also, a weapon to expose the hypocrisy of a state that confers honours for killing and castigates for exercising the personal liberty of smoking up. Ehrhart’s cynicism with the state explodes as he writes, ‘So marijuana is illegal, but it’s okay to drop napalm on gooks. I should really pay close attention to what the dipsticks tell me is legal and illegal don’t you think?’ (Ehrhart 1995b, p.21). Moreover, his disapproval gains further momentum when he remarks, ‘The world would be a better place if Richard Nixon got high once in awhile’ (Ehrhart 1995b, p.22). Such a taunt implies that had Nixon preferred marijuana over the war, there would have been peace instead of bloodshed.

*Busted* tracks Ehrhart’s unstable life after losing his job by exploring the trial that he won due to the professional brilliance of his lawyer, Robert Richards. When Richards asked him to wear the honours that he received for the war to the court hearings to create a favourable impression among the judges, Ehrhart smacked back:

Look, we’ve got a government that’s trying to burn me for less than half an ounce of pot, and I’m supposed to use a bunch of junk that I got from that same government for committing murder and mayhem to get them to believe that I’m really a swell guy. [...] I’m sorry about a lot of things Robert, but smoking marijuana isn’t one of them. I’m not proud of what I did to get those decorations (1995b, p.52).

Richards, who gets him acquitted of all the charges, acts as a reasoning agency between the state and its adversary. Richards stands for the American citizen, who has not been to war but is wary of its detrimental consequences. He has his own critiques against the state but he believes that the system can be changed from within. Disregarding the myth of the law-abiding citizen he argues, 'If you think a particular law is unjust, you work to change it. The beauty of our system is that it allows for that kind of change' (1995b, p.137). Richards counsels Ehrhart to learn to survive in the society he loathes by endorsing the lifelong project of reframing the society. Such a view-point offers a moderate third ground to the political space polarized by marijuana between the establishment and its radical refuters. One can remain faithful to the form of the power structure and still strive to reform it through legal means.

*Busted* also throws light on the hemp plant's ability to evoke hallucination, which generated creative urges in its users. Featuring two sequences that narrate the writer's encounter with the apparitions of three of his comrades who died in the war, the memoir acknowledges its inception to the ghost's essential advice: 'You took the same chance we did. But we don't have a voice anymore. We're dead. You're not [...] So, use it' (Ehrhart 1995b, p.25). During and after the Vietnam War, the consumption of marijuana fleshes out the contours of a counter-narrative that essentially rely on the psychedelic experience of the veteran torn by internal and external conflict. Along with these veterans, a generation of cultural icons was inspired to create a body of literature premised on psychedelic experiences brought about by the varying use of substances. Such a body of poems, novels, journals, songs, and artworks preoccupied with the internal and external effects of drugs deserves more engagement from scholars of cultural studies.

### **Towards a Decriminalized America: A Conclusion**

Michel Foucault in his 1971 *Lost Interview* identified not only the moral opprobrium attached to drug use but also on the impact of drugs on remapping the horizons of human perception. He asked:

Deep down what is the experience of drugs if not this; to erase limits, to reject divisions, to put away all prohibitions, and then ask oneself the question, what has become of knowledge? Do we then know something altogether other? Can we still know what we knew before the experience of drugs? Is this knowledge of before drugs still valid or is it a new knowledge? (Foucault 1971).

Pertaining to the points of interrogation evoked by Foucault, the use of marijuana, as we have observed, left a profound impact on the Vietnam generation. Marijuana succeeded, primarily, in unpacking its transgressive potential to emerge as an enormous threat to the army. Furthermore, in its configuration as a symbol of peace, it consolidated consensus against the state apparatus that perpetuated violence through the police and the army. A study of the narratives under consideration has shown how the consumption of marijuana and its consequences not just helped the soldier to physically sustain the war but, on a much deeper level, provoked the veterans and the general citizens to question the authoritative nation state that caused the war in the first place. Marijuana gained importance in the sense that it became a comparatively healthier resort than other drugs to support the veteran and the average American disillusioned with the futility of the Vietnam War and the failure of the American Dream.

My paper has demonstrated these political ramifications. Moreover, it must be mentioned how marijuana went on to affect the politically-informed cultural productions of an entire generation. Vehement campaigns in favour of the personal right to smoke up against the

ban compelled several writers to engage with the question of marijuana. In 1966, the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg authored an article titled the *Great Marijuana Hoax* to speak against the attempts carried out by a paranoid state apparatus to curb what he believed to have fuelled his creative pursuits. He saw the ban as an 'arbitrary cultural taboo' (Ginsberg 1966). In 1971, John Lennon extended his solidarity to the imprisoned weed activist and poet, John Sinclair, by writing and performing a song about him, *It ain't fair for John Sinclair*. Rather than being a mere guilty pleasure, marijuana transformed into a matter of wide political, medical and legal debates that went on to shape our current-day perceptions about the nuanced connotations of this recreational drug. The discourse that came out of these debates changed policies in individual states in the US. In this regard, my paper has been a humble attempt to explore the socio-historical context that produced a particular genre – Vietnam War literature – among a wide array of texts that engage with drugs. On a concluding note, it can be jocosely remarked that Richard Nixon lost two crucial wars in his life. It is striking that, more than forty years after the USA's force withdrawal from Vietnam in 1974, Nixon's legacy lies in ruins. Not only did the US army fall in South-East Asia, but the recreational use of marijuana in the USA, far from being banned, is now on the rise. Its consumption is decriminalized, even legal, in quite a few states enclosed within the federal structure of the USA, with many more campaigning to join the league!

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