

Gabriel Nahas

Vociferous campaigner against marijuana and other illicit drugs

Gabriel Georges Nahas, anesthesiologist and cardiopulmonary physiologist (b 1920; q 1944, University of Toulouse), died on 28 June 2012 from a respiratory infection.

In 1969, the year of the famous Woodstock music festival and the height of the hippie movement, Gabriel Nahas attended a meeting of the parent teacher association at a local school that would change the direction of his life.

At the meeting, Nahas, a professor of anesthesia at Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York City, heard a detailed presentation of the increasingly widespread use of marijuana in US cities. He was shocked. For more than a decade he had been publishing papers regularly on cardiac, pulmonary, and coronary research and was a recognized expert on acidosis.¹⁻³ But from that point on, his main research interest switched to an effort to try to prove the dangers of marijuana and other illicit drugs.

Just Say No

His efforts, though, went far beyond the laboratory. He became an extremely polarizing leader of the antidrug movement. In the 1980s Nahas supported Nancy Reagan, wife of President Reagan, in her antidrug Just Say No campaign, appearing with her at a public rally. He believed that marijuana could weaken the immune system and contribute to leukemia and other cancers, infertility, and brain damage.

Nahas, who was a member of the French resistance during the second world war and was not afraid of a battle, became a hero to millions, but also a lightning rod for criticism and ridicule from others, especially those who supported legalization of marijuana use.

"Dr Nahas was a resistance fighter," says Robert L DuPont, a so called drug czar in the White House under presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, as well as the first director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse. "He enjoyed the David role in David versus Goliath battles wherever he could find them, and he sure found them in the US over the past four decades. He was supremely confident he was right. I quickly came to agree with him in his judgment about marijuana's dangerousness."

Gabriel Georges Nahas was exposed to the potential dangers of illicit drug use early in life in Alexandria, Egypt, where he was born on 4 March 1920 to a French mother and Lebanese father. Hashish use was widespread; he often



Nahas supported Nancy Reagan, wife of President Reagan, in her antidrug Just Say No campaign. He believed that marijuana could weaken the immune system and contribute to leukemia and other cancers, infertility, and brain damage.

saw men on the street who seemed drunk. His parents did not shield him, telling the boy that they were suffering the ill effects of hashish.

As a medical student in France in the second world war Nahas set up a network to help about 200 downed British airmen escape to Spain. He was captured several times by German soldiers and had his ribs broken during one interrogation. For his heroism he received the French legion of honor, the US presidential medal of freedom, and the order of the British Empire.

Nahas earned his medical degree in 1944 from the University of Toulouse, continuing his training after the war in the US, including a doctorate in cardiopulmonary physiology in 1953 from the University of Minnesota. He settled in the US, but kept close academic and personal ties in France. He was friends with the French deep sea explorer Jacques Cousteau, who held similar antidrug views and wrote the forewords for three of Nahas' books. After a stint at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, he joined Columbia University in 1959, retiring in 1990.

Nahas published most of his results on illicit drugs in books rather than in scientific journals. His first book, *Marihuana: Deceptive Weed*, was published in 1972 with a foreword written by the University of Oxford pharmacologist William Paton, who stated, "It is its realistic, medically responsible approach that gives this book such a freshness of outlook in a controversial field. Dr Nahas has come to the conclusion, which I share, that the innocuousness of cannabis is being overstated, and its dangers underestimated."

Despite the glowing support from Paton, some negative book reviews followed, including one in the *New England Journal of Medicine* that accused Nahas of basing the book on "half-truths, innuendo and unverifiable assertions."⁴ Other doctors jumped to Nahas' defense, writing supportive letters to the editors of the *New England Journal of Medicine* and the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.^{5 6}

Strong support and bitter opposition

The vehemently opposing opinions triggered by the first book were to follow Nahas for the rest of his life. Each of his almost dozen books, and many of his public antidrug statements, sparked emotional outpourings of strong support and bitter opposition. "His passion stood out," says Dupont. "He was irrepresible and determined. He was a hero of our nation. He was the Paul Revere of drug use, warning the nation of the terrible danger that lay just ahead."

Nahas was involved with or honored by several national and international antidrug groups. He served as consultant for the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs and spoke at antidrug events around the world. Grainne Kenny, a friend of Nahas, said that in 1991 he traveled to Dublin to speak at the first meeting of Europe Against Drugs, which she had cofounded. "He paid all his own expenses," she said. "He didn't take a penny." And she added, "He was a mesmerizing speaker, so full of energy and passion and knowledge." Nahas leaves his wife, Marilyn, and three children.

Ned Stafford freelance journalist, Hamburg

References are in the version on bmj.com.

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2012;345:e6540