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Obama told Walters he does not — "at this point" — support widespread legalization of marijuana. But he cited shifting public opinion and limited government resources as reasons to find a middle ground on punishing use of the drug.



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"This is a tough problem, because Congress has not yet changed the law," Obama said. "I head up the executive branch; we're supposed to be carrying out laws. And so what we're going to need to have is a conversation about, How do you reconcile a federal law that still says marijuana is a federal offense and state laws that say that it's legal?"

The president said he has asked Attorney General Eric Holder and the Justice Department to examine the legal questions surrounding conflicting state and federal laws on drugs.

"There are a number of issues that have to be considered, among them the impact that drug usage has on young people, [and] we have treaty obligations with nations outside the United States," Holder said Wednesday of the review underway.

As a politician, Obama has always opposed legalizing marijuana and downplayed his personal history with the substance.

Obama wrote in his 1995 memoir, "Dreams from My Father," that he would smoke pot regularly with his high school buddies who formed a "club of disaffection." The group was known as the "Choom Gang," says Obama biographer David Maraniss.

"There are a bunch of things I did that I regret when I was a kid,"
Obama told Walters. "My attitude is, substance abuse generally is not good for our kids, not good for our society.

"I want to discourage drug use," he added.

While the administration has not prioritized prosecutions of marijuana users and small-scale distributors in states where it's legal, it has not ceased prosecutions altogether. The Justice Department has continued raids on pot providers — including in states where they are legal — in an approach that experts say is more aggressive than Obama's predecessor, George W. Bush.

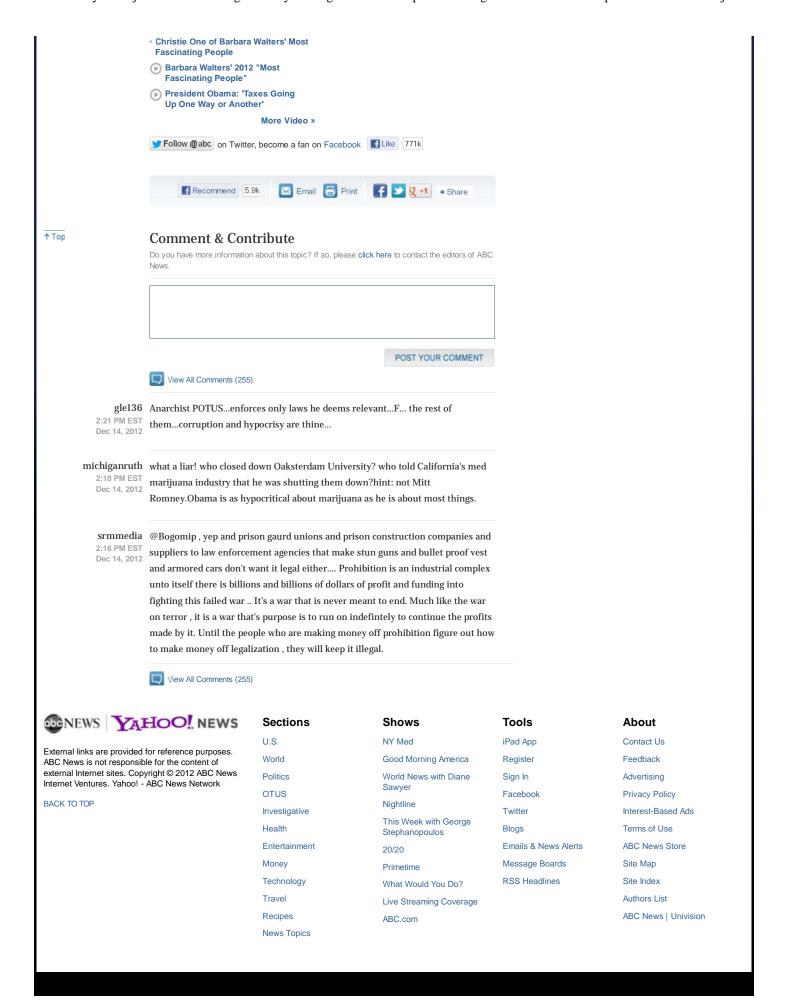
"I never made a commitment that somehow we were going to give carte blanche to large-scale producers and operators of marijuana — and the reason is, because it's against federal law," Obama told "Rolling Stone" in an interview earlier this year.

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