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[Homeland Security](#) is now the big man on campus, doling out scholarships and creating a stampede for research dollars not seen since the dawn of the space program. Even Tommy Trojan's alma mater has a chunk of the action. BY STEVEN MIKULAN

An American Family: Chapter 2

What a tense, unpredictable month it has been for [Luis and Frances Aguilar](#). Turns out that Luis' drug rap may not be what it seems.

Independence Day Special

Raves on the Run

Feds jack up sentences, enforcement against Ecstasy
by David Cogan

It's a club drug, a psychoactive party favor, and for the past decade, it's fueled scenes and raves across the country. For a while it all occurred under the radar, touted by in-crowd hipsters and decried by only the most vigilant Drug War hawks. But in the past year, Ecstasy has emerged at the top of the federal government's hit list, reaching the rarefied status of cocaine, heroin and marijuana.

"America faces another drug threat," Senator Charles Grassley (R-Iowa) declared before the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control in July 2000. "Each night, somewhere in America, there is a dance party. This is not just any dance party, but a rave . . . I hope today's hearing will strengthen our efforts to fight this new and dangerous drug before it explodes any further."

The Ecstasy Anti-Proliferation Act of 2000 passed quickly through Congress — debate over the new law rivaled even the \$1.3 billion Plan Colombia aid package as Washington's hot topic. And this spring, Judge Diana Murphy of the U.S. Sentencing Commission said she had set aside "other congressional directives regarding stalking and sexual offenses against children" in order to focus on a new schedule of jail terms for the trafficking and use of Ecstasy.

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An excerpt from [This is a Bad Time](#), a new collection by cartoonist BRUCE ERIC KAPLAN.

News

[The Well-Oiled Deal](#): OK, so who cares that the state Energy Commission wants to take away local control on all matters dealing with oil refineries? For starters, it involves a high-placed husband-wife team. BY WILLIAM J. KELLY

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LETTERS

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A CONSIDERABLE TOWN

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Steve Zee's ghosts of tappers past. By HOWARD BLUME.

CONSIDERABLE PEOPLE

Fashion sloganeer Reny Monk. BY ERIN AUBRY KAPLAN

24/SEVEN

An afterschool moment with eighth graders Liz and Max. By SEVEN McDONALD

The mass media have followed suit and begun stoking the fires of outrage. Recent stories in *The New York Times* and *USA Today* suggest that Ecstasy is breeding gangland slayings and mini-riots across America. "Violence Rises As Club Drug Spreads Out Into the Streets," read a front-page headline in the June 24 *Times*. That story readily accepted the premise of a Drug Enforcement Agency official who stated, "Some of the dances in the desert are no longer just dances, they're like violent crack houses set to music."

In fact, of the millions of hits of Ecstasy consumed in the U.S. over the past decade, there have been a statistically minute number of reported incidents of violence. Almost none are related to the use of the drug, which induces a euphoric sense of well-being and connection to others that has earned it the alias "the love drug." Rather, in each case the violence resulted from financial disputes over the proceeds of illicit Ecstasy sales.

"There is hysteria in Washington, D.C., as if Ecstasy was the next crack cocaine. It's ridiculous," said Ronald Richards, a criminal defense attorney who specializes in representing Ecstasy defendants.

Certainly, the available evidence suggests, teenagers are getting their hands on the stuff. The University of Michigan's "Monitoring the Future" survey found that lifetime use among 12th-graders increased from one in 25 in 1998, to one in 15 in 1999. Last year, U.S. Customs seized 9.3 million MDMA tablets entering the country either by overnight mail or in the luggage of travelers. In 1997, the same agency confiscated just 400,000 hits.

But in contradiction to Senator Grassley's assertions, teenagers are not regularly "dying" from Ecstasy. According to the Drug Abuse Warning Network, fewer than one-third of 1 percent of drug-related emergency-room visits in 1999 resulted from use of Ecstasy. By contrast, 19 percent of drug-related ER visits involved alcohol in combination with another drug, and 17 percent were due

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[Daisy in the Dreamtime](#), Lynne Kaufman's drama of a Celt in the Outback, reviewed by STEVEN MIKULAN; plus, STEVEN LEIGH

to cocaine. To use another measure, methamphetamine was responsible for 2,600 deaths nationwide between 1994 and 1998. In 1999, there were 4,700 deaths attributed to heroin. During that year, when Ecstasy use was at an all-time high, the drug was cited as a contributing factor in only nine deaths.

Testimony in March before the U.S. Sentencing Commission, charged by Congress with adjusting the criminal penalties for Ecstasy, provided little evidence of a health threat. "MDMA is less likely to cause violence than alcohol, less addictive than cocaine or tobacco, and less deadly than heroin," said New York University assistant professor of psychiatry Julie Holland, who also works in Bellevue Hospital's psychiatric emergency room. "I see alcoholics and crack addicts every time I go to work . . . I do not see people whose lives have been ruined by MDMA."

"There is no present evidence, even in this population, that [Ecstasy] use has led to loss of ordinary brain function, or has in any way compromised the quality of [users'] lives, or that any subtle changes are irreversible," concluded Dr. David Nichols, a professor of medicinal chemistry and pharmacology at Purdue University. "None of my remarks are meant to imply that MDMA is a safe drug . . . but MDMA is clearly very much less dangerous."

The Sentencing Commission was apparently unimpressed, and quickly voted to make the federal penalties for Ecstasy more severe than for cocaine. Possession or sale of 800 tabs of Ecstasy now garners a five-year prison sentence, an increase of more than 300 percent over the old penalty. The sentence for selling 8,000 pills — around 4 pounds of MDMA — is now 10 years. According to Judge Murphy, the commission chairman, such stringent measures were necessary to avoid even harsher actions in Congress. "If we don't follow that directive or satisfy Congress that we've done it in a reasoned way," Murphy told the *Washington Post*, "their remedy is a mandatory minimum."

State legislatures across the country didn't bother to wait for Washington. More than half the states have already raised the

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STYLE

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penalties for selling Ecstasy. In Illinois, a bill awaiting the governor's signature would send those convicted of selling 15 pills or more to state prison for between six and 30 years.

Meanwhile, the FBI, DEA, U.S. Customs and local law enforcement have kept busy. Under the umbrella of Operation Flashback, the DEA opened 158 Ecstasy cases over the past three years. For the most part, rave goers and casual users are not being targeted. Rather, it is the smugglers, purveyors and rave promoters who are in the cross hairs.

Most law-enforcement officials understand that stopping the flow of Ecstasy is doomed to fail, even with stiffer penalties in place. There's just too much money to be made. Ecstasy is made for around 50 cents per dose and sold at nightclubs in the U.S. for \$20 to \$30. Instead, federal and local prosecutors are waging a culture war in places as diverse as Kansas City and Virginia, using innovative methods to attack the Ecstasy phenomenon at its source: rave parties.

The most publicized episode, regarded as a test case of the federal government's ability to go after rave promoters, unfolded earlier this year in New Orleans. A DEA sting at the State Palace Theater on Canal Street resulted, in January, in a federal grand-jury indictment of two businessmen and a rave promoter. Prosecutors alleged, under a rarely enforced federal "crack house" law, that managers Robert and Brian Brunet and rave promoter Donnie "Disco" Estopinal, while not dealing Ecstasy themselves, had facilitated the sale and use of illegal drugs on the premises. The men faced up to 200 years in prison and \$500,000 in fines.

In June, the men cut a deal. "Obviously with the media right now, Ecstasy is the hot drug," Estopinal told the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*. "I think that the rave scene is unfairly shouldering a lot of the blame for what is a major problem with a lot of different people and a lot of different scenes."

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The defendants agreed to pay a \$100,000 fine and ensure that future raves are free of Ecstasy "paraphernalia." That includes such seemingly harmless items as glow sticks, mentholated inhalers and candy pacifiers. The dreaded "chill rooms," where ravers hang out and relax when not dancing, are also banned.

Electronic-music scenesters and civil libertarians rallied to the defense's side in the case, which, they fear, could put the big chill on raves nationwide if similar cases are filed in other states. "The government ought to stick to legitimate enforcement of laws and not try to become culture cops," said Joe Cook, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union.

But government officials said they were pleased with the outcome and promised more to come. "I think this is going to have a major effect in this area and in other areas that have the same sorts of problems," said interim U.S. Attorney Jim Letten. "When gathering places make drugs available or actively help kids get high and sometimes overdose, we're going to move in."

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