

Tobacco industry once had high hopes for pot

By Evan Halper, Los Angeles Times

Richard Nixon was in the White House, his “war on drugs” was in full swing, yet Big Tobacco was secretly exploring the possibility of becoming Big Pot.

Newly discovered documents from tobacco company archives at UC San Francisco show that major companies in the cigarette industry investigated joining the marijuana business in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The companies were driven then by the same shift in public attitudes that is now pushing legalization around the country.

One company even asked a federal counter-narcotics official to secretly secure marijuana from the government for research.

“We request that there be no publicity whatsoever,” a Philip Morris vice president wrote in late 1969 to Milton Joffe, drug sciences chief at the Justice Department’s narcotics bureau. “We will provide the results to you on a confidential basis, and request that you not identify in the form of any public announcement where the work has been done.”

Joffe responded that Philip Morris could skip Food and Drug Administration review of its application for government pot. “I do not feel there is any bar to maintaining the confidentiality you request,” he wrote.

The documents, discovered by public health researchers, were disclosed Tuesday in the Milbank Quarterly, a health policy journal. They not only shed new light on the Nixon era, but appear when some Wall Street analysts and health advocates say tobacco companies may again be considering the expanding

market for legalized weed.

Legalization seemed in the air in the 1970s, though Nixon staunchly opposed it. He ignored a presidential commission's recommendation in 1972 to decriminalize possession for personal use.

But 11 states would do just that between 1973 and 1977. Jimmy Carter was elected to the White House in 1976 on a platform that included marijuana decriminalization. Views shifted dramatically in the 1980s, however, and President Ronald Reagan oversaw a harsh crackdown that included imprisonment for thousands of nonviolent offenders.

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