How Rick Steves Sees the World

Rick Steves is a travel guide and writer who lives in Edmonds, Washington, and spends about 100 days abroad each year. His "Europe Through the Back Door" books and TV shows on PBS are familiar to millions of readers and viewers.

Two years ago Allen St. Pierre of NORML noticed Steves's name on the membership list and invited him to join the advisory board and to talk at the annual meeting. "Every time I come home I'm reminded that I'm coming back to the land that has the shortest vacations in the rich world," Steves told NORML in 2003. "And the highest prison population. It's really quite an adjustment. There's been a mass dumbing down of our society. We've been made to see things in a simplistic, us-versus-them, Evil-empire way!"

At this year's NORML meeting in San Francisco, Steves restated his humane views in a keynote talk, excerpted below. Steves is in his late 40s—a sandy-haired, bespectacled, intelligent, pragmatic man, so calm that he seems slightly bemused even when he's expressing outrage. His experience as a travel guide makes him especially well suited to begin guiding this country back towards sanity. Rick Steves for Secretary of State!

What Steves said to the marijuana-reform activists was implicitly critical of single-issue narrowness, ostentatious patriotism, and communicating in soundbites. But the way he said it was so gentle, friendly, and respectful that nobody took offense.

One thing I’ve learned from my travels is how Europeans are a little more progressive than us in dealing with social problems. Every time there’s a death sentence commuted in the United States, there’s a light show at the Coliseum in Rome. They celebrate your escape when we commute a death sentence in the United States....And of course when you travel in Europe you realize that there is a non-criminal approach to marijuana that could be quite inspirational to American policy makers if they would just learn about it.

When you think about taking a trip, you can take a trip with your marijuana or you can take a trip with your passport. It’s kind of fun to take a trip without having to travel. Just put me in a nice location with a National Geographic and a joint and I’m climbing Mt. Everest. That travel is really quite cheap if the dollar’s too low....And you can do your actual travel and mix some appreciation of marijuana into that and it becomes kind of super-travel.

A lot of Americans are not edgy enough to smoke where it’s illegal, but it’s enjoyable for them to have an opportunity to enjoy some recreational use of marijuana without the paranoia that comes with doing that publicly in the United States.

First time I ever smoked was in Afghanistan. As a kid I didn’t want peer pressure to make me do something my parents said I shouldn’t. Over there it was just like going local. "When in Rome," you know. And when in Afghanistan, this is what you do. The bus stops and everybody stands around and watches a goat get slaughtered and passes around the bong.

—I mean, you stand on the rooftop of your hotel and there’s chariots going by, torchlit, and the lightbulbs are all glowing outside your hotel and there’s chariots going by, torchlit, and the lightbulbs are all glowing outside...
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When you’re in Shanghai you see these skyscrapers going up all the time. You see the equivalent of a skyscraper every day in Shanghai, surrounded by a sea of poverty. When you walk through that, it helps to see these skyscrapers as silettos just sticking up through this fertile soil of a billion people. You’ve got to make your way through this very young spring so people can better enjoy them.

You’re looking into the eyes of Mi- chaelangelo’s David and you’re actually seeing him size up the darkness of medieval superstition right there, five hundred years ago when Florence was pulling itself together, they’re tough! You can get ‘em when they’re doing this... (rubbs his hands).

The Dutch have so many creative ways to solve problems. You can com- plain about junksmail all you want. In the Netherlands they have stickers on their mailboxes that say yes or no, so they don’t get junkmail unless they want it. Americans say “We can’t have pedestrian streets because then cars can’t get to my shop.” In Europe they have pedestrian streets with little swipes, things for a credit card and you swipe it if you’re a resident and the gate goes down but otherwise it’s traffic free. In the Netherlands 40 percent of the traffic is on two wheels. There are entire communities in Europe that are going to be wind-powered. There’s a race going on right now for that.

They deal with their problems by thinking outside the box. And as Europeans unites, what they’re doing gets more impres- sive. It’s easy to write Europe off as the “old world,” but they’ve got a bigger economy and a bigger population than we do right now. 400 million people with 11 trillion dollar GDP and they’re not spending half of their disposable income on the military, they’re investing it in their own infrastructure. It’s breathtaking what’s going on there.

Our society is making some hard choices right now to cover our govern- ment’s military needs — cutting right into people’s programs that we take care of in our communities. In Europe those are the last things they’d be cutting. Unemployment applies pressure on them. I had people in Copenhagen tell me they had to arrest a couple of pots- makers every year just to maintain fa- vorited trade status with the United States of America. That’s a pathetic thing.

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Coming home for me is always a little bit of a jolt. The first person that meets me at the airport is a dog. I can’t help but think: “One nation under surveillance.” We pride ourselves on life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, but we have the shortest vacations in the rich world.

Programmers can’t afflict a Titian painting or a Mozart CD to stimulate on their viewersh in some conservative communities without taking heat. In a lot of regions we’re going in the wrong direction in this society and that’s why it’s good for us all to get together and encourage each other and break from this huddled [the United States, meeting] go back into our communities.

Jailing people for pot in Europe would be laughable. But that’s not the case here in the United States. In so many ways I think we’re living a lie.

And that’s one reason why I got in- volved with NORML. And just don’t think if you’re a successful, affluent, free country you need to embrace lies to con your electorate into this or that. We just heard that the intelligence on weapons of mass destruction was mistaken. And they all pretend they didn’t know.

We are routinely outvoted in the United Nations by 140 to 4 on envi- ronmental issues, development of the third world, the criminal court, on Cuba, even Israel. Who stands with us? Israel, the Marshall Islands, and Micronesia. That’s what I call a rogue nation.

If there’s something going on to help with the problems of the desperately poor people, there’s one country that gets in the way, the U.S.A. It’s us. If Canada wants to give discounted medicine for Africans to Africa, who’s going to be in the way of that? We do. If Americans knew this, it could be communicated effectively. I think it would be a very tough sell to get our country a little more tuned into the needs of the people on this planet.

But we are embracing these lies. We buy this stuff. “No child left behind.” “Clean skies.” “I love trees.” “The party of life.” “Tax relief.” “Death tax.” All this terminology is just embrace. They call it the “defense” department. Nobody should ever let that word go by without a challenge. It’s not a “defense” department.

We spend as much as the rest of the world put together on the military and you can’t get elected without promising more. There’s a sign in Norway in that regard: it’s a big problem. We hear that we’re for peace and we’ve got these “Christian values,” but we’re pouting plowshares and swords these days. Let’s cut that record pace. Somebody’s got to just stand up and just say — you know, when Bush talks about freedom and democracy, he’s talking about freedom to other people’s natural resources and liberty to use their cheap labor. That’s what they’re talking about!

I was down in El Salvador last week, I just wanted to see what was going on in the developing world. They’ve got their struggles between the left and the right down there and the leadership party in El Salvador was almost go- ing to win the presidential election last year and President Bush went to send his brother Jeb down there to stand by the rightwing and tell the Salvadorans “If you vote for the leftwing, we’re going to buy top remittances coming down from all the refugees working in the United States.” Which is a third of the money in El Salvador’s economy. So most of the people voted for the rightwing, against their interests, because of this threat from the United States. That’s democracy every day.

A leading Jesuit priest, an educator in El Salvador, says whenever he hears the term “democracy” these days, his bow- els cringe. I’ve got an editorial about that. If you’re curious about what I learned down in El Salvador, it’s at ricksteves.com.

Nobody tells us that every week there’s a tsunami worth of inno- cent children that die of starvation on this planet. It’s just structural poverty, there’s a mania here in this country that the other nation on this planet. It’s just structural poverty, and America is the flagbearer of this structural poverty around the planet.

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One thing I’m concerned about is the mass dumbing down of our society. The stuff I’ve been talking about, we go “yeah, yeah, yeah,” but the average person doesn’t get it. It’s because of fear, I think, and because powerful forces in our society have been dumbing us down. They would find it convenient if we all become just mindless producer-consumers.

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We’ve got a White House that spends millions of dollars advertising in the Super Bowl trying to tell people that marijuana causes teen pregnancies. And it’s surrounded by beer ads! Now what’s causing the pregnancies?

I’ve got friends who are teachers and the DARE program by any teacher’s assessment is somewhere between ineffective and counterproductive. When you get a DARE officer in the teachers lounge, teachers who are free spirits — Dead Poets Society types — are cowed into silence. You can hear a pin drop in the teacher’s lounge when the DARE officer is there. No one will question DARE because it’s bad news for your job security if you are known as somebody who is a little bit open-minded about creative ways to deal with drugs and children. It is so exciting to go to a DARE meeting at school and question it. I mean, many parents there want to do it but they’re just too chicken. Many parents know this is bogus but they just are afraid and this fear is what’s keeping us down.

At home, I have two teenage kids. My wife is a nervous wreck. Parents are taught that this is a gateway drug and it’s 20 times as powerful back when we did it innocently when we were kids and all this kinds of stuff. I’m excited about having credibility with my kids. One of the perks I got for being on the advisory board here at NORML is I can invite Keith Stroup over for dinner and introduce my teenage kids to a lawyer who has dedicated his life to an ideal rather than people with a lot of money.

There’s a nobility in our struggle that I think can be explained a little better. My daughter just wrote a paper. She got to choose whatever topic she wanted and she chose “Why marijuana should be decriminalized. I just read the teacher’s response to it two days ago. She got an ‘A’ but the teacher said, “We don’t all have to agree with you, but it’s a good paper.”

I think the underlying thing about this propaganda war on the part of our government against marijuana is that even more than stopping kids from drug use, what’s motivating them is instilling fear in parents. Because fear is the only way they’re going to keep us down.

It’s sort of bad news to make Hitler parallels but it’s getting more and more like that.

Normally, I’m not talking about the decriminalization of marijuana, I’m talking about foreign policy and 9/11 stuff and terrorism. That relates to my travel stuff more directly. But it is the same thing! Our government wants us to be afraid and the fear enables them to manipulate us this way.

For goodness sakes, we’ve got doctors and scientists and medical experts that have to be politically correct to give our government advice. It’s sort of bad news to make Hitler parallels but it’s getting more and more like that. Our environmental policies, our AIDS policies, are shaped by people who are driven by ideological agendas. I mean, tears cause AIDS now... Our government is embracing this. It’s amazing to me.

I was very impressed when I read on the NORML website a bulletin the Drug Czar sent out to all the prosecutors listing 20 reasons why marijuana is the devil’s weed. Each one of these points is refuted very solidly on the NORML website. But that our government would be giving this trash to prosecutors with the implication that you better be running with this sort of standard...That’s just really — somebody’s got to stand up to that.

Travel teaches you a respect for history. We should learn from history. We had this 13-year experiment with Prohibition and I think by any sober assessment, it just made a lot of criminals, filled a lot of prisons and cost our society a lot of money back in the ’20s. It was big government at its worst.

Today, more and more people are waking up to this prohibition that’s keeping Americans who shouldn’t be criminals criminals. It’s causing so many people to be arrested every year. If one person arrested for marijuana is contributing to the congestion of our prisons right now, that’s one person too many. We need to balance our activism. I think your marijuana activism will be more effective if you’re also into the PTA and homelessness and the schools and public television or whatever. It makes me more credible because people know I’m into other causes, also. It makes me feel more effective as an advocate of decriminalizing marijuana.

We have a clear message and you’ve just got to have these figures: 750,000 Americans were arrested last year because of marijuana, 88% of them for simple possession. Our country blew seven billion dollars on this.

This should be a conservative issue. We can talk about the European solution. Fifteen years they’ve been experimenting with treating marijuana as a medical concern rather than a criminal one. Even crusty, conservative law enforcement types like it this way.

We need to pre-empt the discredit. They’re going to say: “You’re for children abusing drugs?” “No, we’re not for children smoking pot, we’re not for hard drugs, we’re not for driving when you’re high, none of that stuff!” But you need to pre-empt that because they’ll try to discredit you right away.

Responsible adult use is okay, but nobody’s talking about kids getting easy access to pot. We need to shoot off that torpedo before they torpedo us with it. People think advocating for NORML...