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### Pretzel logic

Tuesday, January 22, 2002

THAT NOW-famous presidential bag of pretzels has no doubt been consigned to the ash heap of history -- or at least the nearest White House trash can. But don't be surprised if you see Asa Hutchinson, head of the Drug Enforcement Administration, rooting around in there for the mischievous munchies. Mr. Hutchinson is on a fierce crusade to stamp out a hitherto-unknown menace to society: Wacky snacks.

Mr. Hutchinson, the former Arkansas congressman appointed by President Bush as the latest general in the 30-year "war on drugs," has issued orders banning a number of snack foods routinely sold in health food stores, because they are made with hempseed or hemp oil, and thus might contain minute traces of THC -- the active ingredient responsible for the "high" in marijuana.

And what are these dangerous substances threatening the innocent innards of America? Corn chips, candy bars, ice cream, salad oil, veggie burgers, cereal, and, yes, pretzels. Purveyors of foods containing hemp have until Feb. 6 to clear their shelves, or face federal prosecution.

The amount of THC in these products is minuscule, the manufacturers say -- at about the same level as the opiates in poppy-seed bagels or the trace amounts of alcohol found in orange juice. And in fact, hemp comes from a different part of the cannabis plant than marijuana, and is useless as an intoxicant.

Congressional critics say Mr. Hutchinson's micro-focused zealotry is a waste of money and manpower, especially in a time of national emergency.

Let's hope that while Mr. Hutchinson is playing Elliot Ness with granola bars and pretzels, the DEA has a few agents left to deal with "lesser" problems -- like the life-wrecking scourge of crack cocaine or the heroin flooding our cities.



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