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The Vientiane Connection: Trading Drugs for Peace

THE POLITICS OF HEROIN, by Alfred McCoy (Harper and Row $10.95).

"The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia," is not an easy book to read, and not much fun really. Even with the old sure-fire spy-gangster-three spook elements it's not much fun, because there is something disturbing about the subject, or subjects.

There is nothing very charming about the heroin trade anymore, because it is hurting too many people, has pitted too many lives; and there is precious little enchantment left in the work of our foreign cryptoperatives because it can lead to some very dirty, very enduring situations.

But the subjects are very much with us, and need to be treated, and that gets done here pretty well.

THE BOOK GOT started by accident, author Alfred McCoy explains. A member of the Antiwar Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars, in 1970 he coedited "Laos: War and Revolution" for Harper and Row, and included a section on the role opium traffic played in Southeast Asian politics.

Editor Elizabeth Jakab took a run up to New Haven where McCoy was (and is) working on his doctorate in Southeast Asian history and persuaded him to do a book on the junk trade and tradition. It's hard to say what she envisioned, but McCoy saw a quick-in-and-out. Perhaps 250 pages, paperback, to be finished by September 1971. He was off by one year, 150 pages and a cover.

He went to Europe, began talking around Paris with old French Indochina hands: Refugees from the Diem regime of Vietnam, exiles, former French colonial, army and intelligence officials.

One of the former French officials "sort of sat me down and ran down to me very tersely, very neatly how they ran the opium trade," McCoy says. "I was flabbergasted."

He talked with Col. Roger Trinquier, who was among the leaders and losers against the Viet Minh in 1954, who told him how the French sought to cement relations with the Meo tribesmen in the Indochinese uplands "To have the Meo, one must buy their opium."

"And he said he wold expect the Americans were involved in the opium traffic the same way he was," McCoy recalls. "It was just an economic imperative for anybody who's going to treat with that tribe."

And at that point, history turned into journalism.

WHAT McCOY found in Southeast Asia was not an American duplication of the French opium traffic role. He found evidence of opium moving on CIA airlines, found opium growing, moving through territory which was under CIA dominion: "They did carry the stuff. They were shipping it. They were [illegible] it. It's a level of very, very extreme complicity that actually becomes involvement.

"It's not like the French military intelligence actually managing and directing traffic for profit and as a source of financing. But they [illegible] from it because by providing facilities for their allies (the Meo, remnants of Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintag, Laotian government officials, others) they are enforcing the political strength of their allies, providing them with a national base."

He says conversations with a former USAID (United States Agency for International Development) official indicated a heroin refinery was operating [illegible] the CIA's Long Cheng headquarters in Laos.

"It's as if you were allowing a heroin refinery to be operating in your garage in your back yard, not attached to your house. The fine line of involvement . . . I think you'd be put in for abetting."

The CIA must have thought it could get "out in" for something because early last summer, after McCoy testified in Senate narcotics hearings, the CIA asked for a look at the book before publication. This reaction from the normally invisible, unflappable agency was extraordinary.

After Harper and Row agreed, the CIA studied the doument, specified objections. he publisher decided they were without merit, and publication came a month ahead of schedule.

American allies, or former allies, implicated by McCoy in the drug trade include former South Vietnamese Vice President Ky, the late Ngo Dinh Nhu. And Americans contributing to the growing complicity include more than the CIA shadow-men. Writes McCoy:

"Rather than sending U.S. combat troops into Laos, four successive American presidents and their foreign policy advisers worked through the CIA to build the Meo into the only effective army in Laos. The fundamental reason for American complicity in the Laotian opium traffic lies in these policy decisions . . ."

DEALING historically—opium, morphine and heroin trade has a position of long standing in Southeast Asian economies—and politically—the traffic has been fostered by a succession of governments, colonial and native—McCoy's major point becomes a matter of little dispute: American heroin users are getting more and more of their drug from the "golden triangle" area of Laos, Burma and Thailand. Official estimates of U.S. heroin sources used to attrubute no more than five percent to Southeast Asia; now the figure is rising to 25 percent, McCoy says.

The book, says this historian-scholar, is primary a heroin book: "What I hoped it would do is fill an informational function, and raise a debate.

"And I hope somewhere in the smoke the substance doesn't get lost—that people begin to understand that the old image—the Turkey-Marseille-New York route is something of interest to moviegoers and historicans and that it is a part of the present, but not part of the future."

The Vientiane Connection? McCoy says he has already talked with one moviemaker about the possibilities.

JAMES HARPER, Free Press Staff Writer

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