

LIFE & LETTERS

HEROIN AND THE CIA

by Flora Lewis

THE POLITICS OF HEROIN IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA

by Alfred W. McCoy
Harper & Row, \$10.95

One fact is beyond dispute: heroin is flooding into the United States in sufficient quantities to support an ever growing number of addicts. Estimates about the drug traffic are unreliable, but trends are painfully clear in mounting deaths, young zombies stumbling through city streets, crime to the point of civic terror. There are said to be some 560,000 addicts in America now, twice the number estimated two years ago and ten times the level of 1960.

Another fact goes unchallenged: suddenly, in 1970, high-grade pure white heroin, which Americans prefer to the less refined drug more normally consumed by Asians, appeared in plentiful and cheap supply wherever there were GI's in Vietnam. The epidemic was a vast eruption. It took the withdrawal of the troops to douse it, for the fearful flow could not be staunched.

Beyond those facts, the sordid story of drug trafficking has been a shadowy, elusive mixture of controversial elements. It was obvious that there must be corruption involved. It was obvious that there must be politics involved, if only because the traffic continues to flourish on such a scale despite the energetic pronouncements of powerful governments. It takes a map of the whole world to trace the drug net.

Since the United States suddenly

became aware of the sinister dimensions of the plague and President Nixon bravely declared war on drugs (unlike the persistently undeclared war in Indochina), it has been customary for U.S. officials to pinpoint the poppy fields of Turkey and the clandestine laboratories of Marseille as the source of most of the American curse. Nobody denied that the bulk of the world's illicit opium (some say 70 percent, some say 50 to 60 percent) is grown in Southeast Asia and particularly in the "golden triangle" of mountains where Burma, Thailand, and Laos meet. But the U.S. government insisted, and continues to insist in the 111-page report on the world opium trade published in August, that this supplies natives and seldom enters American veins.

Not so, says Alfred W. McCoy, who spent some two years studying the trade. And further, it is certain to become less and less so as measures which the United States demanded in Turkey and France take effect in blocking the old production and smuggling patterns. This is of crucial importance for two reasons. One is that firm establishment of an Asian pattern to America means that the crackdown in Turkey and France will be next to futile so far as availability of heroin in the United States is concerned. The second is that focusing attention on Southeast Asia would bring Americans to understand that the "war on drugs" is inextricably involved with the Indochina war, and has to be fought on the same battleground from which President Nixon

assured us he was disengaging "with honor."

McCoy, a twenty-seven-year-old Yale graduate student, worked with immense diligence and considerable courage—for the opium trade is dangerous business and the combination of opium, politics, and war can be murderous—to document the facts of the Asian pattern.

A good deal of it has been common gossip in tawdry bars of Saigon, Vientiane, and Bangkok for years. But the gossip mills of Indochina are a long way from the streets of Harlem and the high schools of Westchester County. The general knowledge that the rumors reflected is a long way from precise, confirmed detail. So the Asian pattern had never come through clearly in the United States.

Now, in his book *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia*, McCoy has set it down. To show how it developed, he had to backtrack. The use of opiates in the United States has a long history. It wasn't until after World War I that widespread opprobrium, added to growing understanding of the dangers, turned the trade into an underworld monopoly. But World War II disrupted the supply routes. Unable to get drugs, American addicts were forced to quit the hard way. The market diminished, and, with a modicum of enforcement effort and international cooperation, might have been wiped out.

A single U.S. official act, McCoy believes, turned that chance around and enabled the creation of a worldwide octopus of evil almost beyond

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society's power to destroy. That was the deportation of Charles "Lucky" Luciano from New York to his native Sicily in 1946. While he was in prison he had cooperated with the U.S. Navy by arranging with the Mafia to ease the path of American troops invading the island, and the Navy was proud of the result. It wasn't the only time that American intelligence used criminals to help the war effort. War, and intelligence, are dirty businesses and criminals are sometimes best at dirty skills.

Luciano not only kept his bargain. He made an extravagant, enormously profitable best of it to reestablish the flagging "honored society" and arrange the links which would assure a thriving drug trade to the United States. He was something of an organizational genius, in McCoy's view. Whether or not McCoy is correct in thinking that the network couldn't have been built without him, he did indeed succeed in building it and forging the key bond to the Corsican syndicates, the underworld society in France on which the drug structure now rests.

Once the connections were made, the shifting drug pattern became virtually indestructible, because it produced such vast profits that it could buy the indulgences needed to perpetuate itself.

The Corsicans were also entrenched in French Indochina. When Middle Eastern supplies of opium became inadequate for the burgeoning heroin trade, they had the contacts to tap the Southeast Asian sources developed in the first place as the result of British colonial greed. The British fought two wars for the right to create a lucrative opium market in China in the mid-nineteenth century. The Communist government of China wiped it out, quite ruthlessly, but the evil tradition remains deeply imbedded in the economies and customs of China's southern neighbors.

McCoy shows with devastating narrative skill how, again and again, the need for money and the lust for power led both colonial and independent Asian governments to turn to the opium trade. During the French Indochina war, a government, for the first time, it seems, deliberately violated its own laws against the trade for military purposes. "Operation X" of the French secret service aimed at securing the support of the Indo-

chinese hill tribes in the fight against the Viet Minh. It transformed the occasional opium cultivation by the tribesmen into a production upon which they came to depend for their livelihood. It also provided the transport and marketing arrangements on which the pattern of the Southeast Asian trade still rests.

Traffic dwindled when the French army left at the end of the war. Ngo Dinh Diem, America's choice to keep South Vietnam separate and anti-Communist despite the provisions of the 1954 Geneva accords, battled and defeated the Binh Xuyen gangs. The French had entrusted Binh Xuyen with the opium business in Saigon in return for information and clandestine help. U.S. authorities approved, and cheered Diem's victory over the kingdom of vice. They didn't understand how intricately and inseparably opium and political power were entwined in Saigon.

Diem learned faster than the crusading Americans. Though his regime was puritanical in some superficial ways which irritated the Saigonese—dancing was banned, for example—he allowed his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu to revive the Saigon rackets for the same reason France had used them. There was no other way to get the money to buy the informers to enable the authorities to keep the Communists from penetrating Saigon to the point of collapse.

President Kennedy did realize that the corruption which finally permeated the Diem regime would never allow South Vietnam to become healthy enough to resist the Communists on its own. So Washington dropped Diem, and he went to his death in 1963. But the rackets did not fall with him. The structure remained for the unavoidable use of whoever sought to cling to power in South Vietnam without a solid popular base—so far, beyond the ability of any South Vietnamese to build. Eventually, inescapably, the Americans accepted and came to use the one weapon which—more than B-52's, more than antipersonnel bombs, more than search-and-destroy sweeps, more than pacification—had proven effective in holding Saigon together.

McCoy does *not* say that the Central Intelligence Agency, in charge of the war in Laos and undercover operations in Vietnam, actively engaged

in the opium traffic to acquire funds, as the French did in Operation X. He says that "only the Agency itself can answer" whether that happened or not, an innuendo which is all the more unfortunate and unwise because the charges he does make are amply founded and documented. It is a self-destructive failing of a certain kind of investigative journalism to attempt to provide all the answers, by deduction and implication, so that doctrine can be fully served, when what can be proven is enough. McCoy has proven enough to demonstrate his major thesis:

That the U.S. government has been involved in the narcotics traffic in Southeast Asia on at least the level of coincidental complicity by: (1) allying with groups actively engaged in the drug traffic; (2) ignoring the activities of known heroin traffickers; (3) knowingly allowing American aircraft, aircraft crews, and other material to be subverted for the transport of opium and heroin.

The CIA flatly denied this. In a formal critique of the book delivered to the publishers, the Agency said, "The truth is that CIA has never been involved in the drug traffic and is actively engaged in fighting against it. . . ."

The denial is disingenuous. No doubt the CIA never wanted to be involved with drugs. There has never been the slightest bit of evidence produced that the CIA as an organization or any of its directly employed American agents engaged in the drug traffic. But, as McCoy shows, the CIA knew perfectly well that the French had organized the hill tribes of Laos to support their war by encouraging opium production, and the CIA knew perfectly well that opium continued to be an essential lubricant in getting the Meos to fight our "secret war." It knew that General Ouane Rattikone, removed only last year as chief of staff of the Laotian army, which is otherwise totally dependent on the United States, supplemented American subsidies with regular and substantial opium profits. He boasted about it openly.

The CIA knew perfectly well that the remnants of the Nationalist Chinese armies left behind in northern Burma and Thailand used opium for money to buy guns with which they not only conducted U.S.-sponsored raids into the People's Republic of

China but also defended their opium trade against competitors. The CIA probably knows more about the involvement of top Thai generals, with whom the United States works closely, in the opium-heroin net than McCoy was able to find out, although he made astonishing penetrations into the dank jungle of secrecy that is high-level Thai corruption.

The point is that the CIA didn't care, and didn't think it was supposed to care. It made something of a matter of pride about not being prissy and moralistic and lily-fingered about local customs and the habits of local leaders and their methods of winning and holding power. It stuck to its own business of fighting Communism, however that business might best seem to be done.

As McCoy says: "Unlike some national intelligence agencies, the CIA did not dabble in the drug traffic to finance its clandestine operations. Nor was its culpability the work of a few corrupt agents, eager to share in the enormous profits. The CIA's role in the heroin traffic was simply an inadvertent but inevitable consequence of its cold war tactics."

Because of its dedication to what it considers its proper business, the CIA has been offended and upset at charges which it says "could create an accepted myth that the CIA has been involved in the drug traffic. . . . We believe that the effect of Mr. McCoy's book is to do a disservice to this fight [against drugs] and to dishearten the many sincere people in CIA who are at least as concerned about this menace as Mr. McCoy."

So it has been with many of our institutions in the saga of Vietnam. Honest public servants, doing what they thought was right, have been disheartened to discover the unintended results of their efforts. But the results are there.

The book has flaws. It tends to be repetitious at points, because the pattern it traces is complex and is constantly doubling back and overlapping. More serious, McCoy accepts some secondary and deductive sources which cannot be considered irrefutable. But he also has many new firsthand sources and specific details which are more than sufficient to make his case, and a marvelously well organized section of documentary notes and an index, which reinforce the book's authority.

The most serious flaw, to my mind, is a leftist bias quick to note the undeniable motive of anti-Communism in the decisions which helped the drug trade flourish, but never aware of the Communist motives and actions which prompted the reaction. For example, McCoy shows how French Socialists worked with the CIA in the immediate postwar period (strengthening the Corsican syndicates in the process) against the Communist drive for power. It was, he says, serving "U.S. interests." It never seems to occur to him that French Socialists, and many other Frenchmen, opposed Communist power in France in their own interest, and for reasons vivid in their own experience, refreshed even today as they watch the life of Czechoslovakia and the plight of intellectuals in Russia. It never seems to occur to him, as he writes disdainfully of Western Europe's apprehension "over Soviet gains in the Eastern Mediterranean," that Western Europe saw Eastern Europe occupied and tyrannized, in blatant violation of formal treaties. It never seems to occur to him that people who have watched the Brezhnev doctrine in operation are not thinking primarily of America's wishes when they resist expansion of Soviet power.

But the reporting is generally solid and it supports to a substantial extent McCoy's devastating conclusion: "Indeed, in the final analysis the American people will have to choose between supporting doggedly anti-Communist governments in Southeast Asia or getting heroin out of their high schools."

It is probably misleading to assume, as McCoy does too easily, that smashing the Southeast Asia pattern will smash the heroin trade. But he has demonstrated, I think conclusively, that the trade cannot be liquidated so long as the United States supports the corrupt regimes of Southeast Asia. That is what the book is about, and it was McCoy's purpose in writing it, just as it was Daniel Ellsberg's purpose in releasing the Pentagon Papers, to convince the American public that the United States cannot win the Vietnam War but none of its leaders have the courage to end it.

Ellsberg failed, in the sense that President Nixon has managed to allay public distress and keep the war going by changing tactics. In part, that failure was due to the fact that

controversy over publication of the papers diverted the attention Ellsberg wanted to focus on analysis of the war. There has also been a controversy over the publication of McCoy's book, this time created by those of his friends who denounce Harper & Row for allowing the CIA to see the galley proofs before public release. It is a poor precedent, though in the circumstances it doesn't seem heinous to me. It would be much worse if McCoy's proponents cause him to fail in his real purpose by turning his book into a "censorship attempt" issue instead of an issue of war and drugs.

Another lesson emerges from the book, which McCoy doesn't have room to discuss but which would be a worthier subject of debate about the CIA than whether Harper & Row should have given it a prepublication chance of rebuttal: that is whether, apart from the moral revulsion and ill

repute brought on the United States by CIA "dirty tricks," there is any net gain of any kind as a result of their operations. Intelligence is certainly necessary. Intelligence evaluation is crucial. But McCoy's book, and many other disclosures, create at least a very serious question about the value of the operational side of the CIA. What has the United States achieved from the CIA-run war in Laos? What did the United States get from the abortive coup attempt in Indonesia, or the Bay of Pigs? What was the final benefit of the CIA-mounted revolution in Guatemala? It is true that the CIA probably didn't do anything the Russians don't do, but it is time to ask whether fighting fire with fire even works. *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia* shows the evil it unwittingly produces. The next question is whether anyone can show that undercover operations actually do any good.