

20 OCT 1972

A packet of
high-quality heroin

LIFE BOOK REVIEW

The book the CIA couldn't put down

THE POLITICS OF HEROIN IN SOUTHEAST ASIA
by ALFRED W. MCCOY (Harper & Row) \$10.95

One cool, clear January morning in 1970, I journeyed upward through the jungle-covered hills on the Thai-Burma border to interview a contingent of the Kokang Revolutionary Force, a band of Burmese guerrillas, about their revolt against the government in Rangoon. The talk around the campfire that day was not of revolutionary struggle, however, but of smuggling opium. And their chief worry was not the Burmese army but the remnants of Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Chinese whose gear-wheel flag could be seen floating over Thai territory on the next mountaintop.

Even as recently as 1970 the muddled politics of the opium-growing hill tribes and the American agents who operate among them like white gods seemed the stuff of Eric Ambler novels, a problem for Asians perhaps but not a big worry for Americans. But even then the pure heroin refined from Southeast Asian opium was finding its way into the bloodstreams of American GIs. The infection now shows every sign of following them home.

Alfred McCoy, a 27-year-old Yale Ph.D. candidate, has spent the last two years unraveling this complex situation. It is his thesis that Southeast Asia is rapidly replacing Turkey as the main source of heroin in the U.S. By supporting the very people who are most involved in the trade, moreover, our government has itself become involved in the passage of opium as "simply an inadvertent consequence of its Cold War tactics."

The CIA has given a boost to the book's sales by foolishly asking to read the manuscript before publication. The CIA's lawyers said the book "could create an accepted myth that the CIA has been involved in the drug traffic." Yet their written criticism of the manuscript seemed pathetically thin. For example, the CIA denied any "substantial" contact with the Nationalist Chinese forces in Southeast Asia after 1951. But McCoy puts his sources, including a former CIA operative, on the record to the contrary. The debate breaks down over the meaning of the word "substantial." Again, the CIA denies that Air

America, the CIA contract airline in Laos, carries opium. But Air America pilots are contract soldiers of fortune, and, in the bars of Vientiane, they often admitted to it.

One should remember, however, that opium-growing has long been a way of life to the hill tribes, and as such is neither illegal nor immoral. Once the political decision was made to arm the tribesmen in the anti-Communist cause it became inevitable that the agency would become at least tangentially involved in opium. Ironically, the CIA-based clandestine Meo army have been all but run out of the opium-growing areas of northeast Laos.

The book is much more than an exposé of CIA activities, however. McCoy lays out the whole history of the opium trade, going back to colonial and precolonial times, and explains in detail how the system works today. But though he paints a clear picture of governmental corruption in our client states and of the political vacuum in northern Burma, where most of the world's opium grows, it is still difficult to accept his conclusion—that the answer to the problem lies not in curing addiction at home or in smashing the syndicates, but in eradicating production in Southeast Asia. "The American people will have to choose between supporting doggedly anti-Communist governments in Southeast Asia or getting heroin out of their high schools," he concludes.

Unfortunately, the long history of our involvement in Southeast Asia has shown that we seldom have the leverage over our clients required to impose this kind of solution. It is questionable whether even the most intensive economic or diplomatic pressure could completely cut out the deeply ingrown opium business from that region. And if not Southeast Asia, are there not other fields in which poppies can grow? If we have found we cannot be the world's policeman, can we hope to become the world's narc?

by H.D.S. Greenway

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APPROVED FOR RELEASE
DATE: 29-Oct-2009