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PROGRAM Today Show

STATION WRC TV
NBC Network

DATE August 15, 1972 7:00 AM

CITY Washington, D.C.

AN INTERVIEW WITH ALFRED W. McCOY

FRANK McGEE: In this portion of the program we're going to talk with Alfred McCoy, the young man who's been in the news lately because of a conflict with the Central Intelligence Agency, the CIA. It's his assertion that the CIA as well as other government agencies are involved in the illegal narcotics traffic in Southeast Asia -- a claim the CIA says is totally without foundation. He has a lot of other things to say about the politics of the narcotics trade in Southeast Asia. I think you'll find him interesting.

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McGEE: A writer claims the United States government is actually participating in drug traffic in Southeast Asia. In just a moment we'll meet him and ask him to substantiate that charge.

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McGEE: In the triangle where Laos, Thailand, and Burma meet, opium has been produced as a cash crop for more than a hundred years. Some narcotics investigators, as well as members of Congress, believe this area provides 70 percent of the world's illicit supply of heroin and that much of it makes its way into the United States.

A new book called "The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia" traces the increase in opium production in this area since the end of World War II, and it also makes the claim that various governments in Southeast Asia, including South Vietnam, are involved in the production and transport of illegal narcotics. Perhaps more significantly, it asserts that the United States government and its agencies have actually supported the opium trade.

The book was written by Alfred W. McCoy, who spent 18 months researching in Asia, Europe, and the United States, and has testified before a congressional committee where his

TIS/EC-844

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charges were made under oath.

Mr. McCoy, thank you for joining us. Let me ask you first what United States agencies are involved in this and -- and what proof do you have of it.

ALFRED W. McCOY: Well, first of all, the involvement is on three levels. One, aligned with corrupt local groups, providing them with aid, without pressuring them to get out of the narcotics traffic. This has been done by almost all U.S. agencies operating in Southeast Asia -- the State Department, USAID, and the Central Intelligence Agency.

Two, whenever allegations from the media or from Congress concerning the involvement of these local allies is forthcoming, U.S. agencies, most particularly the State Department embassies in Southeast Asia, come forward with usually very, very vehement, usually inaccurate denials about these allegations.

And then finally, U.S. agencies, particularly the Central Intelligence Agency and its charter airline, have been actively engaged in the transport of illicit narcotics in Southeast Asia and northern Laos.

So those are the three levels of involvement and those are the agencies involved.

McGEE: Okay. And what proof do you have of this?

McCOY: All right, well, for example let's take the more sensational charges here, the ones the media have concentrated the most on. I don't think it's the most important.

McGEE: I don't care where the media is concentrating. We can skip to something else if you'd like.

McCOY: No. It's the...

McGEE: Let's get at the most serious one.

McCOY: All right. Well, the -- let me just for a moment, okay?

McGEE: Uh huh.

McCOY: That the -- that U.S. agencies, that the CIA and its charter airline have been actually engaged in this...

McGEE: That's Air America.

McCOY: Right. Have been engaged in the transport of illicit opium in northern Laos.

All right, now, for example, Senator Tunney, Ramparts

magazine, a number of sources had -- had -- had aired this charge prior to my trip to Southeast Asia. And I decided that the only way to really confirm or deny this was to go into an actual opium-growing village in northern Laos, which is supplying troops for the CIA's secret army that's fighting in Laos against the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese, and to actually find out how they were getting their opium to market.

I spent ten days in a -- in a village called Long Poc (?) in northern Laos, about 90 miles north of -- of Vientiane. And I did interviews, most particularly with the chief district officer in the area, a man named Getsu Yong (?), who told me that Air America aircraft had been carrying opium out of the village for the last three years.

McGEE: He's a Laotian?

McCOY: He's a Meo. A Meo -- a hill tribe that is supplying troops for the CIA.

McGEE: And he told you what?

McCOY: That Air America aircraft have been coming into the village. Officers, Meo officers in the CIA's secret army, have been getting off the aircraft; the aircraft would then return to the CIA headquarters at Long Tieng. The officers would go through the area buying up opium. In this one village alone they were buying almost a ton of opium every year. The aircraft would then be called back to the village, and the officers would load on these, you know, substantial quantities of opium, fill up the helicopter, and then return to Long Tieng with the opium.

Now, what I found most interesting about -- let me...

McGEE: Yes, okay.

McCOY: What I found most interesting about the CIA's response to my trip to the village, and also to my charges, was their -- was their -- was their actions against my source, Mr. Getsu Yong.

First of all, shortly after I left the village, CIA officers from Long Tieng flew in to -- flew into the village of Long Poc and told Mr. -- told Mr. Getsu Yong that if any more information came out of the village he'd be arrested, and led him to believe that if he were arrested he would never come back alive.

McGEE: How do you know that?

McCOY: How do I know that? It's because my photographer, a man named John Evingham (?), who's a -- who took the photographs which are in the book and is a correspondent for Dispatch News

Service in Washington, was in the village several times last year and several times this year. More particularly, he was in the village the day that the CIA interrogated Getsu Yong -- I believe it was this month -- actually was sitting on the -- well, after a prior receipt of my manuscript, I don't know exactly when, the CIA decided to go interview some of my sources.

And actually the way they conducted those interviews they -- they in effect intimidated them in an attempt to silence my sources.

A CIA helicopter flew into the village, picked up Getsu Yong, flew him to Bon Sung (?) where he was berated by CIA officer for about an hour, let him back; and he asked my photographer, who happened to be in the village -- he said he was enormously frightened by the...

McGEE: Getsu Yong.

McCOY: Yes, that's right.

McGEE: And he was talking to your photographer?

McCOY: Right. He was enormously intimidated by the experience, particularly in light of the earlier threats that had been made to him. And he said, "Do you think that they will send Vang Pao's officers to" -- no, "Do you think they will send the helicopter to arrest me? Or do you think they will send Vang Pao's officers to shoot me?"

McGEE: Okay. Now, other than this man, who -- who after all...

McCOY: Oh, well...

McGEE: Did -- did you see with your own eyes, for example, any opium being loaded onto an Air America plane? Or...

McCOY: First of all...

McGEE: ...any evidence like that?

McCOY: No. First of all, I -- I -- you know, he gave me -- he just didn't flatly state it; he gave me very detailed evidence of -- of exactly how the traffic functioned. Then I spent most of my time in the area going around from village to village. He would say, "The officers went to this village and they went to that village." I went from village to village interviewing the headmen in all the villages.

Now, I was not there during the opium growing season, so there wasn't actually any opium in the village. It had already been carried the previous May. I was there in August-September

of last year. The previous May it had been carried out by Air America helicopters. So that it -- there was none to be carried out; it had already been carried out.

McGEE: Uh huh.

McCOY: I interviewed a number of other sources, including General Ouan Radikan (?), former USAID officials, the former commander of the Royal Laotian Air Force, who all -- you know, who all, you know, corroborated and provided supplementary evidence on Air America's involvement in the traffic.

I don't think there could be any reasonable doubt that Air America was carrying the opium.

McGEE: Well, the -- the managing editor -- managing director of that operation says that your charges are "utterly and absolutely false."

McCOY: Uh huh.

McGEE: But then...

McCOY: I wouldn't expect him to admit it. Would you?

McGEE: Well, let me -- let me ask the questions.

McCOY: Okay.

McGEE: Because I -- I'm -- I'm not trying to harangue you here, I'm just trying to get this -- this out.

Now why, in your opinion, would the CIA be involved in -- in such an activity?

McCOY: First of all, it's not a case of corruption on the individual -- on the part of individual CIA officers. It's not a case of using the opium traffic to finance CIA covert operations, as French military intelligence did during the first Indochina war. It's simply a case of bowing to the political and economic imperatives of the region.

The CIA found itself in Laos with a limited -- limited amount of -- of human resources. The Laotian Army is extremely inefficient, very, very incompetent. So what they did in order to combat the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao was recruit a clandestine army among the Meo tribesmen, who are a very, very warlike people. They -- they live in the mountains. They fight well.

All right, now it also happens that their major cash crop is opium. The CIA mobilizing the Meo population to fight the North Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao -- and it found itself having to support them. It has to give them rice. It has to.

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give them food. It takes total responsibility for this tribe. And their major cash crop is opium, so it inevitably finds itself flying the opium out of the hills. It's just bowing to the imperatives of the situation.

McGEE: Uh huh.

McCOY: In other words, I don't think it's -- I don't think it's a question of maliciousness. I think it's a question of priority. The CIA, as -- as other U.S. agencies in Southeast Asia, the State Department and USAID, are so committed to winning the war, so committed to fighting the war, that anything else, any other priority in the region, simply gets lost, with this one willing -- you know, pressing goal.

And so that they just figure that sometime we'll get rid of this, or maybe never we'll get rid of it, but it's not important now.

McGEE: I want to talk with you about the possibility, indeed, the probability, of some of this heroin finding its way into the hands of American troops in Vietnam, and what you think might be done about the situation, realistically and reasonably...

McCOY: Uh huh.

McGEE: ...in just a few moments.

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McGEE: Does a substantial amount, a small amount, or any of this opium and heroin from this triangle area find its way to our troops in Vietnam?

McCOY: Oh, the -- almost, I'd say, all of the heroin that's being used by U.S. GIs in Vietnam or has been used by U.S. GIs in Vietnam for the last two years comes from the Golden Triangle region of -- of -- of Laos, Burma, and Thailand. There's no question of that fact. Nobody disputes that.

The really controversial point, of course, is how much of this heroin is finding its way into the United States.

McGEE: How much is what?

McCOY: Of this heroin that's being produced in the Golden Triangle region. Or how much of the morphine from this region is going to lab -- other laboratories in other areas, particularly Hong Kong and Marseilles, and then finding its way into the United States. That's the only controversial question.

McGEE: How much would you say of the American supply of heroin comes from this area and by this process?

McCOY: It's very, very difficult to judge, because it's in transition now. For -- let's say since the end of World War II until the mid-/late 1960s, it was definitely true that almost all of the heroin supply came from the -- the Turkey-Sicily-Marseilles axis, essentially from Europe and the Middle East.

However, since the late 1960s, and particularly in the light of U.S. diplomatic and law enforcement initiatives and successes in Europe, narcotics syndicates have been forced to make a transition to Southeast Asia. And I'd say that as Turkey's opium production goes -- it's been completely abolished this year -- that it'll be late this year or early next year that almost all of our heroin supply will start coming from Southeast Asia.

I know NBC Chronolog in their work came up with an estimate from reliable sources that 30 percent comes from Southeast Asia now. That's a pretty arbitrary estimate, because it is in transition. All I can simply say is that organized crime has moved out to Southeast Asia. It has connections with indigenous Corsican syndicates in Southeast Asia, with indigenous Chinese syndicates in Southeast Asia. And the transition is in process.

McGEE: What do you think the United States government could realistically do about this?

McCOY: I think the key problem in Southeast Asia is governmental corruption: that police -- police agencies, military agencies, in Thailand, South Vietnam, and Laos, profit from the traffic and are actively engaged in the traffic. So that any kind of realistic enforcement campaign can't begin until these agencies change their attitude and tell our Southeast Asian allies: "Make narcotics, any narcotics work, a top priority." And right now they're not.

They're simply involved in the traffic at all levels, right up to the very...

McGEE: Well, listen, we -- our -- our government agencies conceivably can change their attitudes. But what can they do to make those people change?

McCOY: No. They -- I -- I do not think that given the political -- the present political and military situation in Southeast Asia that -- that U.S. agencies are in a position to change their attitude.

McGEE: To change the attitudes of the others.

McCOY: No, no.

McGEE: Their own?

McCOY: I think -- I think there's a fundamental contradiction between our political and military goals we're presently pursuing in Southeast Asia and cleaning up the narcotics traffic.

For example, when I went down to Washington...

McGEE: Well, excuse me. I want to press that point a bit. In other words, unless we change our objectives in Southeast Asia...

McCOY: Right.

McGEE: ...we can do nothing about this heroin problem.

McCOY: All right. Now let me -- let me give you -- let me explain that a bit and clarify it. Okay?

I went down to Washington and testified in June. After that I was called over at the State Department by some friends, who had some informal talks with me. And I said, "Okay, you say" -- and they said, "You know, I think you're too pessimistic."

I said, "Well, let's break it down country by country and see, you know, what you're doing." I said, "How about Thailand? Secretary Rogers has said -- Secretary of State Rogers has said we're getting good cooperation from the Thais. What do you think?"

And universally everybody in the State Department said, "Not true. Not true."

I said, "Well, why does Secretary of State Rogers say we're getting good cooperation?"

They said, "You have to understand: it's politics. We're moving all of our air bases, all of our Air Force, out of South Vietnam to Thailand. We have no leases on those bases. We have no right to be there. We're there at the -- at the good graces of the Thai government. Therefore we're using all of our diplomatic and political leverage that our aid and our position in the region gives us in order to get -- in order to pressure the Thais, in order to encourage the Thais to let us remain there. We simply are not in a position to make any narcotics hook a top priority at this point."

And you see, all of this leverage on -- on getting these bases open, on fighting the war...

McGEE: Well, that would apply to other countries...

McCOY: That would apply to -- right. It is particularly true in South Vietnam, where you've got systematic corruption in the Thieu administration. For example, your own correspondent, Phil Brady, filed a report last year in which he said that the --

quote: "the biggest pusher in South Vietnam is" General -- General Thieu -- "President Thieu's chief national security advisor, General Vong Hon Quong (?)." At the same time Mr. Brady made those charges, I was conducting my own interviews with -- with top level officials in the police intelligence bureaucracy in Saigon, and I found very, very -- you know, very similar and enormous detail about General Quong's activities: that the Vietnamese may -- I don't have time to deal with them now -- but just many of the highest officials in the -- in the Thieu administration are working closely with General Quong to profit from the narcotics traffic.

And yet the United States government has done nothing about this. They know. Phil Brady was thrown out of Saigon.

McGEE: Well...

McCOY: But nothing happened.

McGEE: What it boils down to is the United States feels -- finds itself in the position where it has to accept these conditions if it wants to achieve other objectives.

McCOY: Right. We -- we've picked allies who are corrupt. And one of the forms of corruption -- you know, there's currency manipulation, there's theft of U.S. aid supplies, there's theft and sale on the black market of military goods, and there's narcotics traffic. And it's always been felt that you really can't deal with corruption as long as you're fighting the war. That's what the locals do; that's what the natives want. They want their money from corruption. We don't touch it.

And narcotics traffic has never been treated differently. As long as we continue to support these corrupt local governments in Southeast Asia we will be unable to deal with the narcotics problem.

McGEE: Well, if I understand your book properly, you -- you say the same thing happened immediately after World War II in -- in Europe: that the United States government found itself in the a position where it had to accept certain conditions that allowed the heroin traffic, which was virtually dead at that time, to flourish and -- and come back again.

McCOY: Right. That was most particularly the OSS, the Office of Strategic Services's alliance with the Sicilian Mafia, and the CIA's alliance with the Corsican syndicates in Marseilles. They were basically involved in a situation where they were fighting local Communist parties and were looking for any ally they could find.

The only allies they could find in Sicily that were effective was the Mafia. And in Marseilles it was the underworld. And so they used them.

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At the time it was felt that, you know, Communism was so evil that the block, the defeat of Communism in Europe was so important that any means was justified. And so they used those means.

McGEE: What are your -- what's your background and what are your credentials for doing this kind of research and writing this kind of book?

McCOY: I'm a Ph.D. student in Southeast Asian history at Yale University. I simply...

McGEE: In Southeast Asian history?

McCOY: Right. My specialty is in modern political history in Southeast Asia. Harper and Row asked me to start doing research. I spent 18 months doing it. Before I started I just simply had some general knowledge and background on Southeast Asian politics. I just simply worked very hard to gather this information. That's my -- my credential.

I have written a number of other things in the past. I edited "Political History of Modern Laos," which Harper and Row published. I've done some other articles on Southeast Asia.

McGEE: In the -- then, it's your -- most of the -- 50 percent, I think you said, of the illicit heroin supply now comes from Burma.

McCOY: No, I said -- I said your network said 30 percent and I think that was...

McGEE: You have -- you have a graph in your book showing 50 percent coming from...

McCOY: Well, opium -- I know. Seventy percent of the world's illicit opium supply comes from the Golden Triangle. And 50 percent of the world's illicit opium supply comes from Burma.

McGEE: Ah. It's 50 percent of the 70 percent, then, comes from Burma.

McCOY: No. I meant 50 percent of the world's total supply. Okay?

McGEE: Okay. Do we have the same sort of situation in Burma?

McCOY: No. The situation in Burma is much more complicated. The United States has never been involved in Burma to the same extent that they have in Thailand and Laos.

However, for example take the history of CIA cross-border operations into China. The CIA used opium smugglers.

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They used the Nationalist Chinese bases inside Burma, which were used for the opium traffic. In other words, the whole logistics of CIA intelligence operations inside Burma, which were a staging ground for operations inside China, were involved in the opium traffic.

This stopped as of last year. But this went on for better than a decade.

Also inside Burma itself the CIA originally built up in the early 1950s the Nationalist Chinese irregular units, which now control almost all of the opium traffic in Burma and which were -- well, before the Nationalist Chinese units were created there was something on the order of probably 40 to 50 tons of illicit opium being grown inside northeastern Burma; by the time that -- by the end of the decade after the KMT, the Nationalist Chinese units, occupied northeastern Burma, with CIA support, this...

McGEE: Okay.

McCOY: ...had blown up to something on the order of three to four hundred tons.

McGEE: The remnants of these Chiang Kai-shek forces used the money that they got from the sale of opium to buy -- what?

McCOY: Arms.

McGEE: From?

McCOY: From? At the time, they were being supplied by the Central Intelligence Agency. But...

McGEE: From us.

McCOY: Well, no. It was indirectly. They were buying from the Thai and the Laotian army. Corrupt generals inside the Thai and the...

McGEE: Well, we're the only ones who make M-1s, so far as I know.

McCOY: Right. Well, that's one thing that I saw when I observed Shan rebel units: they all carry M-1s, M-2s, M-16s, U.S. .50 caliber machine guns. They dress up like the South Vietnamese and Laotian armies.

McGEE: I'm sorry: we've run out of time.

McCOY: Okay.

McGEE: Thank you very much.