

LIFE & LETTERS

HEROIN AND THE CIA

by Flora Lewis

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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