

# The Last Word: Beyond the War on Drugs

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During the twelve months ending in April 2021, the latest date for which there are reliable figures, more than 100,000 Americans are known to have died of a drug overdose. The number is alarmingly high, and represents an increase of nearly a third from the previous year, and up about 75% over five years. It does pale in comparison to covid-19 deaths in the United States during the same time period, which totaled nearly 575,000. For this period, covid-19 was the third leading cause of death in the United States. If overdoses were recorded separately as a cause of death, they would be the sixth leading cause, about tied with diabetes.<sup>1</sup> Opioids, especially those laced with fentanyl, are responsible for most overdose deaths and most of the increase in overdoses, but the number of overdoses caused by cocaine and methamphetamine also has increased in the last five years. Whether you believe the solution is stricter prohibition, harm reduction, or legalization, what is clear is that the United States has a drug problem. The massive number of and increase in overdoses tells only part of that story, but enough to make it a compelling one.

Historians of U.S. foreign relations have written some of the best scholarship on the implications for both U.S. foreign policy and the experiences of countries around the world of the U.S. choice to pursue a War on Drugs strategy for dealing with drugs.<sup>2</sup> These works have helped us understand how U.S. drugs policy, focused on eradicating drugs elsewhere and preventing them from entering the United States, promoted destruction, hypocrisy, dangerous levels of secrecy, and worked primarily to enhance the power of those involved in drug trafficking while failing to reduce use of drugs in the United States. These works almost without exception focus on the Cold War years. A few, such as James Bradford's terrific exploration of how drugs policy has shaped the U.S.-Afghan relationship, do continue the analysis into the post-Cold War era.<sup>3</sup> The War on Drugs has always been fought "at home" and "out there." This scholarship made those connections for us, their careful research producing powerful indictments of U.S. policy.

Our current drugs crisis, often called an opioid crisis but also featuring dramatic increases in use of various prescription and street amphetamines, seems more home grown. Both opioids and amphetamines now can be imported or made in the United States. This is in contrast to the past, when heroin and cocaine always came from outside U.S. borders. Historians of U.S. foreign relations history, with some exceptions, have not embraced study of these post-1990 changes. And only some have connected drugs history to the broader conceptualizations of foreign relations we have seen in the field in the last twenty years. Both history and policy would be well served if more scholars of U.S. foreign relations history took up topics that include drugs history.

The vibrancy of the "new drugs history" may be one reason people in our field have been less visible on this topic. Historians of drugs have their own must-read journal, *Social History of Alcohol and Drugs*, a wonderful conference usually (sadly) scheduled very close to SHAFR (making attendance at both difficult), and jobs in history of medicine and pharmacy, medical humanities, and a range of other places in and outside the academy. Many drugs historians write about foreign relations as part of their broader studies, but they usually are interested in

a society or a drug, and their interaction, more than the effects of U.S. foreign policy.

For example, Lina Britto's recent book on Colombia explores how the global war on drugs influenced Colombia's marijuana market, and the transition in that country to cocaine. Matthew Lassiter is exploring the important, neglected topic of how politics of suburbia in the United States intersected with particular approaches to the drug problem.<sup>4</sup> These are merely two among many examples of the deeply researched, politically motivated scholarship helping us better understand the full implications of how both U.S. and global drugs policies have shaped so many disparate histories in so many places.

I think another reason for the decreased interest by scholars of U.S. foreign relations is that media attention in the United States to the drugs crisis has focused on its domestic implications more than its foreign relations ones. Perhaps the focus is justified: in 2019 (the latest year for which we have global statistics), Americans accounted for more than half of total worldwide deaths from drug overdoses, with 65,717. China, the country having the next highest number, had 11,445 in that year, not only absolutely lower but when considered per capita, substantially lower. The next two countries, India (8,465) and Russia (5,877), also have large populations, indicating that although the drug overdose problem, like the problem of illicit drugs consumption generally, is global, it is much more significant for the United States than anywhere else.<sup>5</sup> The statistics are so stark that comparative study of the kind historians of foreign relations are well primed to do, seems all the more important.

The United Nations 2021 World Drugs Report includes a global map early in the first volume representing what they call "Common Problem, Local Dynamics." Over the United States, the phrases "high level of opioid-related overdoses/increasing use of methamphetamine/cocaine use" hover. Moving south in the Americas, the phrases over Mexico are "manufacture of methamphetamine and opioids" and then over southern Mexico and Central America we find "cocaine trafficking." The northern part of South America has "cocaine production and trafficking," while the southern part of the continent has "cocaine use disorders/cocaine trafficking."<sup>6</sup> The map makes it clear: the drug problem in Central and South America stems largely from the fact that those regions are producing drugs to serve the high levels of demand for all kinds of drugs in the United States.

The other page of the map features Europe, Asia, Africa, and Oceania. The patterns are more complex in this section. Central Asia is listed as producing and consuming both opioids and amphetamine, while mainland Southeast Asia is listed as only producing these drugs. Elsewhere throughout these four continents, the wealthier areas (Australia, Japan, western Europe) are listed as users of drugs, while the less wealthy areas mix trafficking and use. This report identifies what UN officials perceive to be the most significant drug issues in these regions, but we can see in these broad outlines that the illicit drugs market replicates, not surprisingly, how production and consumption work generally under capitalism: less wealthy countries produce the raw materials and endure the dangerous working conditions; wealthy countries consume the products. Not surprisingly, illicit drug production often increases in places where governments are

not fully in control of their territory (Afghanistan) or in process of imposing authoritarian and isolationist rule (Myanmar). From 2015-2020, Afghanistan accounted for more than 80% of the world's opiates production. Mexico, primary supplier to the United States, accounted for 6% in those same years.

What do these statistics mean for historians of U.S. foreign relations? They certainly confirm what all historians of the War on Drugs and foreign relations have argued: the War on Drugs effort to use increasingly militarized, sometimes secret tactics to support drug prohibition by controlling (eradicating) supply has failed. But I think that they suggest to us that we should be integrating study of illicit drugs production, trafficking and sale into the broad range of foreign relations topics. Let me give a few examples of topics that are under-studied.

Until recently, there has been remarkably little written about marijuana and U.S. foreign relations. This is beginning to change. Isaac Campos and Lina Britto, historians of Mexico and Colombia, explore effects of the War on Drugs in must read books for scholars of U.S. foreign relations. William McAllister recently explored the national security implications of the 1937 Marijuana Tax Act.<sup>7</sup> Marijuana use in the United States grew most dramatically in the years after 1945, when the United States was best able to promote the supply control, prohibitionist model. It is surprising that more scholars of U.S. foreign relations have not been interested in the reasons for and implications of that increase. In more recent years, the legal status of marijuana has shifted so that several U.S. states and a handful of countries have legalized recreational consumption of marijuana and even more have decriminalized it or permit medical use of the drug. This diversity of legal status may have important foreign relations implications going forward.

Scholars of U.S. foreign relations have produced excellent scholarship on the history of development and economic aid, but rarely does this scholarship integrate consideration of the illicit economy in the places targeted for development. Nineteenth century imperialism prompted crop substitution away from food and subsistence crops to those useful for export, including opium. More recently, though, growing the raw materials for drugs, whether coca leaves, poppies or marijuana plants, has appeal to people who can sell that crop more predictably at a more stable price than for other crops, even though there are dangers to growing an illicit substance. In Afghanistan, for instance, the value of the illicit trade is estimated, for the last several years, to have been larger than the total licit international trade of the country. Drugs historians often pay attention to the effects on development, but development historians are less likely to pay attention to the effects of drugs. The international political economy of processing, packaging, and transporting drugs to market receives only modest attention from political scientists and economists, and nearly none from historians. It is very difficult to study the history of illicit activities, but without attention to the alternatives for labor and capital, as well as the influences of the illicit economy on the functioning of the state, assessments of successes, failures and choices fall short.

This observation applies in some measure to wealthier, more developed countries as well, and more attention to illicit and informal economies in all places would be revealing. One group of scholars found that the illicit drug market in the European Union during 2017 was worth approximately 30 million euros.<sup>8</sup> The U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency estimates that the total of all transactions in the illicit drug trade in the United States is in the "tens of billions" each year.<sup>9</sup> The EU statistic represents the value of drugs sold to consumers, while the DEA estimate adds up the value of each transaction at each stage from arrival or production through processing, transportation and finally to the consumer. The difficulty of finding reliable, comparable statistics is one of the challenges of doing this kind of work. Collaborating with economists has potential to produce important scholarship.

The small but growing attention to environmental history in the field of U.S. foreign relations history offers another important opportunity to include the widespread effects of U.S. global efforts to eradicate drugs. Daniel Weimer's article on

the international politics of herbicide use in Mexico offers an example of the important insights from this approach.<sup>10</sup> The environmental effects of production and eradication of coca and poppies are concentrated in a few countries, but that means that those effects are all the greater in those places. Marijuana production, meanwhile, is widespread, and herbicide use for eradication has been common worldwide. The production and eradication of methamphetamines also has had significant environmental effects. Even the (semi) licit production of marijuana to meet significant demand growth has environmental consequences, since indoor growing can require massive inputs of water and electricity. Recent reports about the presence of pharmaceuticals in rivers suggests that there is wide scope for exploring the relationship between drugs, the environment, and foreign relations.<sup>11</sup>

One of the most dramatic shifts in global illicit drug trafficking is the rise of purely synthetic drugs. Sometimes these are diverted pharmaceuticals, but there is an increasing tendency for illicit producers to set up clandestine labs to manufacture opioids, hallucinogens, and especially amphetamines. The United Nations reports that these labs frequently are in geographical locations over which the international community has little oversight, such as parts of Myanmar and Afghanistan (and the border regions of neighboring countries).<sup>12</sup> Histories of sovereignty, global capitalism, international trade, and the role and power of international organizations would benefit from thinking about the issues, surely not new, raised by the presence of such important manufacturers, of illicit commodities, in areas with only light ties to licit international political and trade organizations.

Some of my thinking on drug trafficking is shaped by Eric Tagliacozzo's *Secret Trades, Porous Borders: Smuggling and States along a Southeast Asian Frontier*. Tagliacozzo reminds us that illicit trade and illicit commodities are not synonymous. Illicit commodities are always traded illicitly, but licit commodities also can be traded illicitly. David Herzberg's recent book *White Market Drugs: Big Pharma and the Hidden History of Addiction in America* approaches this topic from a different perspective, exploring the long history of the ambiguous line dividing licit from illicit drugs.<sup>13</sup> Heroin (illicit) and hydrocodone (licit, commonly prescribed) have nearly the same molecular structure, for instance, but their legal status is very different. Since failures to prescribe opioids in a healthy way has fueled the current drugs crisis to at least some extent, many of us would readily accept Herzberg's argument. But if we couple his with Tagliacozzo's, we are prompted to think much more carefully about the nature of trade in general, and to be more precise as well as more expansive in our conceptions and language.

For instance, we spend time in my Long War on Drugs class talking about whether it is smuggling to go from Canada to the United States to buy alcohol, and not declare it on re-crossing the border. Or, a more complicated situation: when friends in graduate school went to the Saint Regis Mohawk Reservation to buy cigarettes, was that smuggling? Is it smuggling if it is only for your own use? If you are picking up cigarettes for friends and will be reimbursed? If you plan to re-sell the cigarettes? My students, nearly all from Indiana, usually have no personal experience of these activities the way my former students in New York and Massachusetts did. But the exercise of thinking about how one's personal economic actions can be licit or illicit for a variety of reasons prompts them to consider how the broader economy also is shaped by both licit and illicit activities. I wonder how we might conceptualize trade, investment, development, and the foreign relations structuring them differently if we put illicit and licit economic activities in the same frame.

As I was finishing up this essay, the *New York Times* published another article on the overdose crisis in the United States.<sup>14</sup> The story blamed lack of effective, reasonably-priced treatment options, over-prescribing, stronger drugs, and urged prevention, harm reduction, and more research into why people use drugs. Only a couple of sentences suggested that the problem had any connection to foreign relations, mostly noting that heroin

and fentanyl producers overseas had rushed to supply a perceived demand in the United States. The drugs problem is a particularly American one in many ways. But the U.S. drugs problem has shaped economics, politics, and options in other countries in ways we do not fully understand. U.S. foreign relations scholars could help us understand a lot better. I hope you will.

Notes:

1. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) counts overdoses in the “accidents” category when enumerating deaths. See CDC, National Center for Health Statistics, “Drug Overdose Deaths in the U.S. Top 100,000 Annually,” press release November 17, 2021, [https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/nchs\\_press\\_releases/2021/20211117.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/nchs_press_releases/2021/20211117.htm) (accessed February 14, 2022).
2. A partial listing includes Alfred W. McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2003); William B. McAllister, *Drug Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century: An International History* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Jeremy Kuzmarov, *Myth of the Addicted Army: Vietnam and the Modern War on Drugs* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009); Suzanna Reiss, *We Sell Drugs: The Alchemy of US Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); Daniel Weimer, *Seeing Drugs: Modernization, Counterinsurgency and Narcotics Control in the Third World, 1969-1976* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2011).
3. James Tharin Bradford, *Poppies, Politics and Power: Afghanistan and the Global History of Drugs and Diplomacy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019).
4. Lina Britto, *Marijuana Boom: The Rise and Fall of Colombia’s First Drug Paradise* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020); Matthew D. Lassiter, “Impossible Criminals: The Suburban Imperatives of America’s War on Drugs,” *Journal of American History* 102, 1 (June 2015) pp. 126-140. Lassiter’s forthcoming book on the topic is highly anticipated. See also Aileen Teague, “The United States, Mexico and the Mutual Securitization of Drug Enforcement, 1969-1985,” *Diplomatic History* 43, 5 (November 2019) pp. 785-812.
5. Hannah Ritchie and Max Roser, “Opioids, Cocaine, Cannabis and Illicit Drugs,” published December 2019, <https://ourworldindata.org/illicit-drug-use> (accessed February 14, 2022).
6. Office on Drugs and Crime, United Nations, World Drugs Report 2021 booklet 1 Executive Summary/Policy Implications (Vienna: United Nations, 2021), pp. 16-17.
7. Isaac Campos, *Home Grown: Marijuana and the Origins of Mexico’s War on Drugs* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Britto, *Marijuana Boom*; William B. McAllister, “Harry Anslinger Saves the World: National Security Imperatives and the 1937 Marijuana Tax Act,” *Social History of Alcohol and Drugs* 33, 1 (Spring 2019) pp. 37-62.
8. European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, EU Drugs Market Report (Lisbon, 2019), p. 24.
9. Drug Enforcement Administration, 2020 National Drug Threat Assessment (U.S. Department of Justice, March 2021), p. 85.
10. Daniel Weimer, “The Politics of Contamination: Herbicides, Drug Control and Environmental Law,” *Diplomatic History* 41, 5 (November 2017) pp. 847-873.
11. Jonah Fisher, “Pharmaceuticals in Rivers Threaten World Health-Study” *BBC News*, February 15, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-60380298> (accessed February 16, 2022).
12. Office on Drugs and Crime, United Nations, World Drugs Report 2021 booklet 4 Drug Market Trends: Cocaine/Amphetamine-Type Stimulants (Vienna: United Nations, 2021), p. 56.
13. Eric Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders: Smuggling and States along a Southeast Asian Frontier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); David Herzberg, *White Market Drugs: Big Pharma and the Hidden History of Addiction in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).
14. German Lopez, “A Rising Death Toll,” *New York Times*, February 13, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/13/briefing/opioids-drug-overdose-death-toll.html?searchResultPosition=3> (accessed February 16, 2022).