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Bonanza in 'Golden Triangle'

By THOMAS LASK

THE POLITICS OF HEROIN IN SOUTHEAST ASIA. By Alfred W. McCoy with Cathleen B. Reed and Leonard P. Adams 2d. 464 pages. Harper & Row. \$10.95.

Although "The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia" is packed solid with information, some of it of considerable complexity, its charges (for that is what its conclusions are) are simple enough to be spelled out in a school primer. Seventy per cent of the world's supply of heroin, the book says, has its origin in Southeast Asia in an area of northeast Burma, north Laos and north Thailand known as the "Golden Triangle." It is transported in the planes, vehicles and other conveyances supplied by the United States. The profit from the trade has been going into the pockets of some of our best friends in Southeast Asia. The charge concludes with the statement that the traffic is being carried on with the indifference if not the closed-eye compliance of some American officials and there is no likelihood of its being shut down in the foreseeable future.

These conclusions have been drawn by a young Ph.D. scholar from Yale who studied the subject for 18 months and who has already been embroiled with the Central Intelligence Agency over them. Before publication, his book was attacked by the Central Intelligence Agency for what it said were unjust accusations that the agency knew of but failed to stem the heroin traffic of United States allies in Southeast Asia. After reading the galleys, which the publisher, Harper & Row, made available, and sending off a critique to Harper's, the C.I.A. took no further action.

Shuns the Headline Approach

It is difficult for anyone not close to the field to assess the accuracy of Mr. McCoy's material. But it must be said that his book is a serious, sober, headline-shunning study with 63 pages of supporting notes, referring to a large number of personal interviews, newspaper accounts, previously published books, Congressional committee hearings, Government reports and United Nations documents. It is so filled with information that it will take a great deal more than mere dislike of its contents to demolish it.

Perhaps the greatest guarantee of its accuracy is a Cabinet-level report prepared by officials of the Central Intelligence Agency, the State Department and the Defense Department that confirms the main findings of the McCoy book. The report, dated Feb. 21, 1972, said that "there is no prospect" of stemming the smuggling of drugs by air and sea in Southeast Asia and cited as one reason the fact that "the governments in the region are unable or in some cases unwilling" to make a truly effective effort to curb the traffic.

That drug smuggling is not a problem remote from us can be seen from the fact that a shipment of the Double U-O Globe brand, a bulk heroin manufactured in the Golden Triangle, was seized in an amount estimated by the police to be worth \$3.5-million in the Lexington Hotel in this city last November and another shipment worth \$2.25-million by police estimates was taken in Miami. In addition, Army medical officers have noted a rise in the number of

heroin users among G.I.'s. "By mid 1971 the author writes, "Army medical officers were estimating that about 10 to 15 per cent . . . of the lower ranking enlisted men serving in Vietnam were heroin users."

The politics of heroin—and in this book the emphasis is on the politics—is an artful one. Mr. McCoy cites the case of Ngo Dinh Nhu, brother of President Ngo Dinh Diem of South Vietnam, later murdered by his colleagues. During his brother's regime Nhu was head of the secret police and had set up a close apparatus of spies, informers and agents. He was so successful in harassing the National Liberation Front, the political arm of the Vietcong, that after he and Diem were killed, Nguyen Huu Tho, chairman of the N.L.F., told an Australian journalist that Nhu's demise was "a gift from heaven."

Closed and Open Opium Dens

The point the author makes, though, is that to keep the members of this network loyal took a great deal of money and that the only way Nhu could get it was from the drug trade. Diem had entered on his presidency determined to close down the opium shops, the author says, but the profit from the drug trade was so great that his brother restored it and used the money to harass the Communists.

Gen. Tuan Shi-wen, commander of the Chinese Nationalist Fifth Army, based in the Golden Triangle, put the matter succinctly. He is quoted in the book as having said, "We have to continue to fight the evil of Communism, and to fight you must have an army, and an army must have guns, and to buy guns you must have money. In these mountains the only money is opium."

For the most part, Mr. McCoy demonstrates, an illicit drug traffic is carried on for the personal benefit and dollar profit of individuals, including some of the highest ranking officials with whom we do business in Southeast Asia. The picture of corruption that he draws, of cruel and naked jockeying for power, of bloodletting and cynical maneuvering with underworld peddlers, is so strongly documented that it might make even the staunchest defender of the war in Southeast Asia wonder if it is worth it.

The attitude of too many American officials, he says, is one of "embarrassment and apathy." They argue that their job is to fight the North Vietnamese and kill Communists and nothing else concerns them. This moral neutrality is so widespread, the author declares, that one C.I.A. agent even showed the natives how they could improve the yield of the poppy crop.

The underworld in Southeast Asia, the book makes clear, as in the Middle East, in Western Europe, in America, has always been an essential part of the trade. Its members have the advantage of being free of ideology. They worked with Socialists in Marseilles, with the Gestapo under Vichy, with the American liberating forces in Italy. And they work with any side in Southeast Asia as long as somewhere along the line they are allowed to carry on their own activities of drug peddling, gold smuggling and prostitution. It is just a matter of Realpolitik on both sides.