

# The Poppies And the Pushers

## THE POLITICS OF HEROIN IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

By Alfred W. McCoy

With Cathleen B. Read and

Leonard P. Adams II

Harper & Row, 464 pp., \$10.95

By LAURENCE STERN

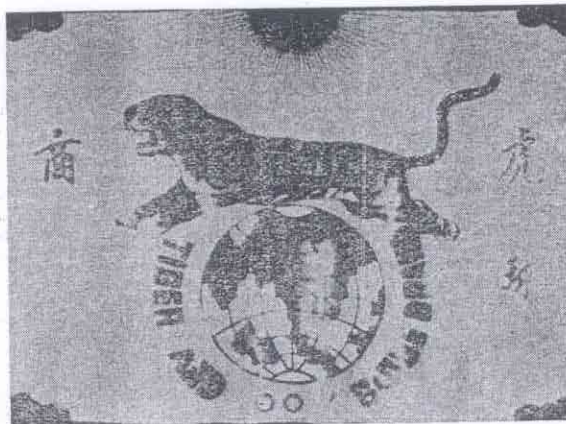
"ORDINARILY THIS AGENCY does not respond to public criticism," the CIA's general counsel wrote the general counsel of Harper & Row publishing company last July 5. "However in this case we are under the strongest directive to support the U.S. government's effort against the international narcotics traffic and are bending every effort to do so. We believe we cannot stand by and see baseless criticism designed to undermine confidence in that effort without trying to set the record straight. . . ."

The subject of this extraordinary letter was *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia* by Alfred W. McCoy, a doctoral candidate at Yale University. Harper & Row provided the CIA with advance proofs of the book and after receiving a statement of rebuttal covering several of McCoy's allegations of Agency involvement in opium traffic, the book was published.

If the intervention had any effect, it has probably been to boost the sales of McCoy's book; certainly it turned its publication into something of a *cause célèbre*. Perhaps the Agency would have better served its own interests by following the time-honored intelligence precept of maintaining silence in times of adversity. Public accountability has never been its strongest game.

By its nature as one of the world's most profitable illicit businesses, the opium and heroin trail is heavily canopied with underworld and official secrecy. In the Golden Triangle region of northeastern Burma, northern Thailand and northern Laos, the principal opium growing and processing area in Southeast Asia, the traffic is fed by highland tribes, minor warlords and paramilitary soldiers, and it is controlled by high-ranking officials of the three countries. This distribution system fed heroin into the veins of American soldiers in Vietnam and into the international heroin stream that sur-

LAURENCE STERN is the roving foreign correspondent of *The Washington Post*.



Two common heroin brands are Tiger and the Globe (above) containing 7/10 of a kilogram of 80 to 99 per cent pure heroin, manufactured in the Golden Triangle area; and Curved Dragon, a retail packet of 3 to 6 per cent pure heroin, sold on the streets of Bangkok for 12 U.S. cents. Illustrations from the book



faces terminally in the ghettos and suburbs of the United States.

McCoy has done a sturdy and comprehensive reporting job. He has interviewed American and Southeast Asian sources who either played a direct role in the opium traffic or are highly competent to talk about it. It is his argument that when the United States embarked on the geopolitical objective of trying to contain Chinese and North Vietnamese power at their borders in Southeast Asia, it slipped inexorably into the narcotics traffic.

The international market had been created long before by the European colonial powers, chiefly Britain and France. Great Britain in the late 18th century took the first big step toward internationalization of the Asian drug traffic by establishing a government monopoly over India's opium harvest, helping finance the regime of the Raj by taxing the product, and beginning the massive export of Indian opium into China. When Chinese imperial authorities tried to stop it, Britain, with its gunships, blasted open the Chinese ports to European trade and Indian opium during the Opium War of 1839 to 1842.

Under the forced infusions of opium from British-ruled India the Chinese imports rose from a level of 340 tons in the first decade of the 19th century to 6,500 tons by 1880. It was in this period that the Chinese began a large-scale program of domestic opium production, much of it in the outlying provinces of Szechwan and Yunnan. By the beginning of the 20th century, China had an addict population of 15 million. The wave of Chinese migrations into Southeast Asia spread the scourge of addiction southward.

The French played a similar role in expanding and monopolizing opium production under colonial authority. Centuries before the French arrived the Meo tribal people cultivated and smoked opium, but more as a ceremonial intoxicant than to achieve the stupefaction of "ly-

ing death" with which the Chinese coolies escaped their wretched life cycle of toil, poverty and disease. The French established their own monopoly and converted the Meo poppy harvests into an important cash crop which was taxed and sold to the growing addict population of Indochina. By the beginning of World War Two, according to McCoy's research, there were some 2,500 opium dens in Indochina serving about 100,000 addicts.

The Viet Minh war of independence eventually became a major challenge to French political rule and a drain on the colonial economy. In countering their guerrilla movement the French turned to the Meo tribal peoples in the Laotian highlands and to their poppy harvests. Meo opium became an important factor both in financing the war and in cementing the loyalties of the tribal guerrillas fighting on the French side. McCoy relates the case of the French Expeditionary Corps' "Operation X," a top-secret project for the collection and transport of Meo opium into the Saigon markets where it was turned over to the Binh Xuyen, an underworld secret society which the French occupation authorities permitted to take over civil authority in Saigon. By the time American influence replaced the French military presence, the poppy was the main cash crop in the Golden Triangle, the opium economy was fully developed, and there were well-rutted patterns for dealing with the tribal mountain guerrillas who had been enlisted by the French in the war against the Pathet Lao and Vietnamese Communist insurgents.

Here the argument begins. McCoy as-

serts that Central Intelligence operations became heavily involved in the opium-heroin traffic. He says that some of the Agency's chief Asian operatives and clients controlled it and that the CIA's contract airline, Air America, moved it toward the ultimate markets.

All this has long been a matter of conventional wisdom and surmise in the bars and embassies of Vientiane, where wags spoke of Air America as "Air Opium," but McCoy seeks to document the case with interviews (alas, some of the crucial ones anonymous) and hard evidence.

One of the most sensational allegations in the book is that Mao General Vang Pao, the most important field commander on the Royal Lao government side, arranged for the delivery of 60 kilos of high grade Laotian heroin (worth \$13.5 million in New York) to Prince Sopsaisana, the Laotian ambassador-designate to France in April 1971. Sopsaisana returned to Laos after French customs officials found the haul in his suitcase and Paris refused to accredit him.

McCoy also asserts that Vang Pao operated a heroin laboratory at Long Tieng, the CIA base just south of the Plain of Jars. In a footnote, McCoy attributes these claims to "a Western diplomatic official" in Vientiane, a "Third World diplomatic official," a "Laotian political observer" and he further asserts that his account has "been corroborated by reports received by the U.S. Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs." The BNDD seems unaware of this, at least at top level.

In its rebuttal the Agency denied any knowledge of Vang Pao's involvement in the opium and heroin trade, which is an understandable flaw in its own intelligence. Vang Pao and his troops have been the backbone of American-supported ground effort in northern Laos to keep the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese forces in check.

The Agency also countered, in its letter of rebuttal to Harper & Row, that Southeast Asians often say what they think their American interviewers and counterparts want to hear. This has indeed been a grave intelligence pitfall for U.S. officials as well as journalists and scholars. But an energetic investigator like McCoy can also pick up information in the field that neither the American intelligence and diplomatic establishments nor local governing elites in Indochina wish to hear broadcast publicly. That is what makes *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia* such worthwhile reading.

The most serious flaw of the book is McCoy's eagerness to blame the CIA for the rise of the Mafia and Corsican underworld and the post-World-War-Two upsurge in heroin traffic—a form of simplistic historical determinism that does little justice to McCoy or to his book. Similarly, his suggestion for dealing with the heroin plague savors of the sort of righteous interventionism that got us into trouble in Indochina to begin with. McCoy's solution is to cure heroin addiction by ending opium production and the growing of poppies.

Illicit drugs will always be available as long as the demand is there, no matter how many opium fields we bomb or defoliate. The problem, and the solution, are in the American communities where the roots of addiction originate.