

The U.S.-Thailand Opium Fiasco



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WITH enormous fanfare last March, the Thai government announced it had burned 26 tons of opium. The pyre was hailed in Washington and Bangkok as evidence that Thailand at last was getting serious about cutting off the flow of heroin to the U.S.

"This quantity of opium, if refined into heroin," crowed the State Department to Congress, "could have supplied the need of one-half the U.S. market for one year." The value of the opium fed to the bonfire was estimated in the hundreds of millions.

Now, the CIA and other federal agencies have quietly informed Washington that something besides opium went up in that bonfire. The real story is that Thailand, and indirectly the U.S., were horn-swoggled into believing that 26 tons of opium were burned, when, in fact most of it was cheap fodder.

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THE TALE of duplicity begins in November, 1971, when the drug-smuggling remnants of the Nationalist Chinese troops along the Thai-Burma Laos border heard the Thai government wanted to buy up some opium for a public demonstration.

The aging Nationalist generals weren't born yesterday. Having lived by their wits for 20 years, they saw an opportunity to make a killing.

Instead of loading raw opium, they pushed 100 mules with fodder, other plant matter, chemicals, and about 20 per cent opium.

The caravans made their way down

from the remote border areas of Kachin and Shan to the northern drug center of Chiang Mai where the burning was to take place.

As one mule after another was unburdened, the Thais paid off the Chinese — in part, probably, with U.S. aid funds. In all, the cagey dope peddlers passed off five tons of opium as 26 tons and pocketed more than \$2 million from the fantastic hoax.

Either through corruption or stupidity, the Thai officials failed to test the huge mounds of "opium" before they soaked it with gasoline and put it to the torch.

Only as the smell of burning molasses wafted through Chiang Mai did the Thais suspect they had been had. Then, it was too late to do anything but cover up their goof.

And cover up they did. They hastily recruited gangs of workers to bury the "hundreds of millions of dollars" worth of fodder and opium ashes.

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LETHAL DOSE — Narcotics agents are turning up a new mixture of dangerous narcotics on America's streets. The mix, sold in plastic bags, is a heavy jolt of cocaine and a small amount of heroine. The drowsy effects of heroin combine with the "kick" of cocaine to give what is called the "up and out" effect. Unfortunately for the users, the mixture can be a permanent "out." By putting the body under the strain of opposing effects, the blend multiplies the dangers of death by overdose.