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# BOOKS OF THE TIMES;From the War on Drugs, Horror Stories and the Case for Peace

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT MAY 27, 1996

**SMOKE AND MIRRORS** The War on Drugs and the Politics of Failure By Dan Baum  
396 pages. Little, Brown & Company. \$24.95.

In a typical passage late in his devastating "Smoke and Mirrors: The War on Drugs and the Politics of Failure," Dan Baum describes a raid in 1992 of a Malibu ranch conducted by a Los Angeles County detective convinced that its half-blind, 61-year-old millionaire owner was growing marijuana.

When the rancher appeared from his bedroom with a pistol in his hand, the detective shot him dead. In a subsequent search of the \$5 million ranch, no marijuana plants were found. The local District Attorney later concluded in a report on the incident that the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department "was motivated, at least in part, by a desire to seize and forfeit the ranch for the government."

This brief account is just one of dozens of horror stories recounted by Mr. Baum, a former reporter for The Wall Street Journal and The Atlanta Constitution, to illustrate the legal excesses to which the war on drugs waged by Washington over the past quarter-century has committed this country.

Along with the hundreds of other vignettes that compose "Smoke and Mirrors," the shocking account of the raid is meant to illustrate the thesis bluntly spelled out in

Mr. Baum's introduction. This holds that the drug war has been "a policy as expensive, ineffective, delusional and destructive as government gets."

Essentially intended to reverse the liberal policy of pre-Nixon administrations by shifting the blame for drug use from "social ills" to the "failings of personal character," the war on drugs, Mr. Baum argues, has only served to make the problem worse while swelling our prison population, discriminating against blacks and compromising all citizens' constitutional rights. The intention of his book, he states, is to provide "a map of how we got here, in the hope of suggesting a way back."

Mr. Baum's pointillist technique is highly effective in many ways. It reduces a complex story to bite-size morsels, often dramatic and sometimes outrageous. It brings the actors in the drama up close for the reader to cheer and hiss (mainly hiss). It banishes dull statistics from the text by summing up the more pointed ones in punchy chapter-ending lists. (For instance: "Federal drug-enforcement budget in 1969: \$65 million. Federal drug-enforcement budget in 1974: \$719 million.")

Yet for all of Mr. Baum's heavy reliance on revealing anecdotes, he manages to trace the major trends he sees as demonstrating his thesis. Particularly arresting among these is his attempt to illustrate how the use of marijuana has been exaggerated as a threat and consequently repressed, with the result that more dangerous drugs like heroin and cocaine have risen in use.

At the same time, his technique has certain shortcomings. Because his vignettes are so brief and plentiful, they feel more selective than they probably are and thereby imply a lack of objectivity on the author's part. The impression of bias this leaves is deepened by the author's failure to acknowledge any middle ground between the extremes of his cases. In his scheme of things, those who put the blame for drug use on "the failings of personal character" and not root social causes are absolutely wrong. Among such people, the likes of William J. Bennett, a director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy during George Bush's Administration, is a total villain, deserving of nothing but ridicule.

Nor does a faintly pretentious note the book strikes help Mr. Baum's credibility. At the beginning he includes a five-page "Dramatis Personae (in order of appearance)," as if to suggest that his powers of characterization are going to prove

as powerful as a playwright's or a novelist's. But they are not, as it turns out; the people who appear in his history are animated more by his attitudes toward them than by his power to light them up. In short, the case he makes is far more compelling than the actors in the drama. So when he ends his book with a section called "Where They Are Now," one's reaction is to ask irritably, What makes him think we would possibly care?

Nonetheless, "Smoke and Mirrors" remains a valuable work of reporting. It plausibly explains how President Richard M. Nixon, by exploiting the public's confusion of heroin addiction in New York City with what Mr. Baum refers to as "teenyboppers smoking reefer," succeeded in making drugs stand for everything that was wrong with America. As John D. Ehrlichman, Nixon's chief domestic adviser, put it in 1976, "Narcotics suppression is a very sexy political issue." In Mr. Baum's version of history, four Republican Administrations got addicted to that issue.

In his epilogue, the author visits a Chicago courthouse to see for himself how drug arrests are processed, and is taken on a tour of the place by a Cook County public defender. At a window the defender points to a building surrounded by what Mr. Baum describes as "a kind of garishly lit industrial park that stretches to a distant highway and, beyond that, the blackness of Lake Michigan."

"That's Cook County Jail," the defender explains.

"What are all those buildings around it?" Mr. Baum asks.

"You misunderstand," the defender says. "That's all Cook County Jail. All the buildings you see between here and the highway. We have six times more people locked up than in the biggest prison in the United States. Twelve thousand. Aside from a few serving short sentences, all of them are waiting for trial and presumed innocent."

"This is American justice at the end of the 20th century," the defender adds. "I'll bet you feel safer already."

If Mr. Baum's closing metaphor is accurate, then he has powerfully explained how the country has reached such a state.

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