

SMOKE AND MIRRORS

The War on Drugs and the Politics of Failure
By Dan Baum
Little, Brown. 416 pp. \$24.95

Go to the [First Chapter](#) of *Smoke and Mirrors*

HEP-CATS, NARCS AND PIPE DREAMS

A History of America's Romance with Illegal Drugs
By Jill Jonnes
Scribner. 510 pp. \$30

Go to [Chapter One](#)

Looking for a Fix

By Guy Gugliotta

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Sunday, August 18, 1996

For more than 100 years Americans have had an up-and-down love affair with dangerous drugs. The cycle begins with infatuation, graduates to obsession and invariably culminates in disaster. Each time it happens, the nation stumbles, at first failing to recognize the dangers, then minimizing them, then belatedly launching a scattershot "war on drugs" that often seems as debilitating as the scourge itself.

The failure of the United States to recognize history's lessons and its sloppy coping strategies form the themes of two new books documenting American drug abuse and efforts to combat it. Both Jill Jonnes's *Hep-Cats, Narcs and Pipe Dreams*, a history of American drug use, and Dan Baum's *Smoke and Mirrors*, recounting the failures of "drug wars" since the Nixon administration, lay down some hard truths.

First, says Jonnes, drugs are "very different from alcohol -- and far more dangerous," because they can be snorted, injected or smoked, providing a quick kick that needs quick reinforcement, something drinking can't match. It is easier to get hooked on drugs, and harder to get unhooked. Second, "availability is fundamental." Whenever drugs are easily

obtained, history shows that use and addiction rise dramatically, often with catastrophic effects on entire societies.

Hep-Cats documents the history of American drug abuse in three "epidemics": opium and cocaine at the turn of the century; postwar heroin, marijuana and the psychedelics; and the current splurge of cocaine and crack. Jonnes's narrative is filled with fascinating anecdotes and factoids. The word "dope," the reader finds, derives from the Dutch "doop," meaning "sauce," an apt description of the cooked brown opium goo smoked by early users. Patent medicines, loaded with coca and morphine, hooked respectable matrons like playwright Eugene O'Neill's mother, finally prompting the government to pass the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906.

After a hiatus during the Great Depression and World War II, drug abuse resumed, promoted first by Harlem's "hep-cats," extending to the Beat counterculture and culminating in the hippie movement of the 1960s. Be-bop saxophonist Charlie Parker looms large in the period, a legendary hedonist who managed to exploit his prodigious talent despite a heroin habit that ultimately killed him. The belief that Parker had somehow found genius in a syringe drove many aspirants to imitate him, with disastrous consequences. When the charm wore off, survivors like Dizzy Gillespie wrote the obituary for an era: "When a dude is using drugs, no one can help him."

It was the hep-cats, strung out on marijuana and heroin, who popularized law enforcement's favorite notion -- that marijuana leads to hard drug use.

Debunking this theory is a major focus of Dan Baum's *Smoke and Mirrors*.

Baum repeatedly points out that marijuana has never killed anyone, and notes that while pot use has yo-yoed as high as 70 million smokers, the heroin addict population remains relatively steady at 500,000. No matter. Federal drug warriors continue to use pot-inflated statistics to leverage ever-greater sums of money in futile efforts to curb drug abuse through punishment. The results, he contends, are an all-out assault on constitutional protections against search and seizure, massive and indiscriminate incarceration and a disproportionate and ultimately embarrassing vendetta against young, black males.

Baum gives Nixon grudging high marks for inaugurating methadone treatment and nods to the Carter administration for contemplating marijuana decriminalization but couches it all in a scathing indictment of politically driven law enforcement. Despite the dangers of drug use, Baum shows that what the country needs invariably is not what the country gets. "Drug wars" tend to be fought for political or philosophical reasons, he cautions, and not for the public good. John Mitchell says, "I like it," when offered drugs as a way to show that the Nixon administration is tough on crime; Bush administration drug czar William Bennett blames the victims' "self-defeating patterns of behavior." Baum tells the reader to look for the hidden agenda.

It is a captivating tale, but the reader is left to ponder what Baum ultimately recommends. The book is not "a manifesto

for legalization," he says, but could be "useful to those plotting a more humane and cost-effective drug policy." But how?

Jonnes doesn't display the same ambivalence. She finished her research as a hardliner, convinced that "law enforcement is key": Making drugs hard to obtain means that fewer people will use them. Her evidence, from the debilitating opium trade in pre-revolution China to the cheap cocaine highs in New York's turn-of-century lower depths, seems irrefutable, although she deals only fleetingly with the debate over marijuana.

Baum, by contrast, remarks that if marijuana were legalized, the number of "regular" drug users would be two million instead of 11 million -- "tragic, resistant to solutions, but statistically miniscule." Still, Jones would caution, without fighting a "war," the numbers would only get worse.

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[Back to top](#)

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