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## A Losing Battle : SMOKE AND MIRRORS: The War on Drugs and the Politics of Failure, *By Dan Baum (Little, Brown: \$24.95; 396 pp.)*

**June 09, 1996** | Michael Massing | *Michael Massing, a fellow at the New York Institute for the Humanities at New York University, is working on a book about the drug problem in America*

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On May 2, Atty. Gen. Janet Reno, flanked by a phalanx of law enforcement officials, announced that the United States had smashed a major drug trafficking ring with tentacles extending into Colombia, Mexico and cities across the United States. In all, the operation netted 130 arrests, \$17 million in cash and 6 tons of cocaine. "The most sophisticated and the most well-coordinated effort that I've ever seen," said one U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration official. The bust was trumpeted on the network news and on National Public Radio and in many of the nation's newspapers.

Unfortunately, those reports offered readers little context. They failed to note, for instance, that operations of this sort are fairly routine. Hardly a year goes by, in fact, that the government does not hold a news conference to announce that it has pulled off the most sophisticated and well-coordinated drug bust ever. Yet somehow the drugs keep pouring into the country. No matter how many traffickers are arrested, no matter how many tons of powder are seized, there's rarely a ripple on the street. Certainly the operation announced by Reno caused no dip in supplies. Few stories bothered to point this out, however. That's hardly surprising, for few subjects in recent years have been as misreported and misunderstood as the vaunted war on drugs.

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Before they attend the next such news conference, reporters would do well to read Dan Baum's "Smoke and Mirrors." An entertaining if tendentious history of the drug war from 1968, when Richard Nixon first declared it, to the firing of Jocelyn Elders in 1993, "Smoke and Mirrors" provides a lacerating look at how we got into this quagmire, matched in futility only by the war in Vietnam. As Baum shows, this battle has been costly not only in national treasure--an estimated \$120 billion spent during the Bush years alone--but also in the violence done to our courts, our cities and our civil liberties. And we have little to show for it.

"At a time when the public debates whether gun laws and wetlands protection violate the Constitution, the war on drugs concentrates unprecedented police power inside the Beltway, all but eliminating Fourth Amendment rights and turning the attorney general into a kind of urban viceroy who can mete out punishment without trial," writes Baum, a former Wall Street Journal reporter who now lives in Missoula, Mont., "The drug war clogs the courts to the point of breakdown. It keeps more Americans in federal prison for drug crime than were in for all crimes put together in 1980. It criminalizes a generation of African American men. . . ."

To show how we got to this point, Baum provides a series of barbed sketches of the often obscure but always zealous characters who have led this peculiarly American crusade. There's Donald Santarelli, a brilliant Justice Department aide who, under Richard Nixon, cooked up such hard-line ideas as preventive detention and "no knock" search warrants; Keith Schuchard, an angry and obstreperous Atlanta mother who, outraged over her daughter's pot-smoking, sparked a revolt against the lax policies of the Carter administration; Dick Williams, a former Army paratrooper who, as a low-level White House

aide, helped advance the notion that there is no such thing as recreational drug use; and William von Raab, the pint-sized, maniacal commissioner of U.S. Customs whose policy of "zero tolerance" authorized agents to seize yachts even if they found only a single marijuana seed aboard. Baum is especially tough on former drug czar William Bennett and his band of acolytes ("Bennettistas"), whose insistence on turning the drug problem into a culture war created a climate in which no enforcement tactic was too excessive, no assault on privacy too invasive.

Along the way, Baum makes the compelling point that it is not crack, cocaine or heroin that sustains the drug war, but marijuana. If it weren't for pot, he notes, "there wouldn't be 11 million regular users of illegal drugs in the United States, there would be 2 million"--the number of chronic users of hard drugs. Since such a group is too small to justify the upkeep of a vast war machine, Baum writes, the drug warriors have insisted on keeping marijuana criminalized, thereby magnifying the scope of the problem. Of the 1.1 million Americans arrested in 1990, Baum notes, 264,000 were arrested for simple marijuana possession. From helicopter raids on marijuana farms in Northern California to the investigation of High Times magazine for running ads for marijuana seeds to the denial of pot to patients with glaucoma and AIDS, Baum shows that "reefer madness" is alive and well in the nation's capital.

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