

Dope Double Agent
The Naked Emperor on Drugs

Michael Agar

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Preface

Dope Double Agent covers thirty-some years in the drug field, so it would take another book to acknowledge everyone who helped or hindered me along the way. Besides, given how politically incorrect the book is, at least for the drug warriors, I wouldn't want to name anyone I'm grateful to and ruin their careers. A few younger colleagues looked at some or all of an earlier draft and, though I knew they'd be sympathetic to the stories, I also knew they'd tell me if I wrote anything too out of touch with reality. By and large they cheered me on. A couple of older colleagues also looked it over and offered some challenging questions to ponder. Though I owe them and hundreds of other people for help over the years, the way I've used and misused that help is my problem, not theirs.

My first reflex was to send a sample chapter to a publisher as I've always done in the past. Credibility from a big name press helps, especially with a controversial argument. But the publishing industry, both commercial and academic, makes our health care system look positively rational. Computer savvy colleagues in hi-tech Northern New Mexico converted me to an outlaw web mentality. So after a professional copy-edited the text and another designed the cover, I let Lulubooks handle the rest.

As I'll explain in the first chapter, I felt an obligation to write this book to lay out the story of America's failed War on Drugs with my own stories of how the machine grinds on to keep its delusions of grandeur intact. I'm hoping the book will be read as an antidote to similar delusions in many other areas as well. *Dope Double Agent* isn't for my colleagues, though I imagine several of them will enjoy it. It's for that mythic general reader who wonders how their leaders and the experts they rely on can so badly miss the point and make things even worse.

One person I can thank, since she's got nothing to do with the drug field. Ellen Taylor read the whole thing, two or three times. I write a lot and I'm telling you, this one was the most difficult collection of words I've ever hammered out. Ellen went through and picked out the good stuff and complained about the bad and insisted I make things clear and help the reader navigate the trails of past times and past places. I owe her.

So welcome to dope world. The right wing will be horrified and the left wing will think I didn't get it right, either, which as far as I'm concerned means we ought to clip some wings and spend a little more time on the ground. May America, one day soon, re-learn how to connect its policies with its realities and reverse what, as I write in early 2006, looks like the decline and fall of the empire, naked emperor and all.

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Chapter One

War--What Is It Good For?

(with apologies to Springsteen)

How has the war on drugs failed?

Let me count the ways.

I've got a lot of counting to do. A few decades worth, officially. More than that, unofficially. Officially, I'm leaving the field of substance abuse research an experienced and acknowledged expert. I've been an insider for a long time. Unofficially, I'm a member of the sixties generation who, like many of my age-mates, logged a few miles on the drug odometer. I've been an insider in drug using worlds as well.

The dope career hasn't been all bad. Far from it. Governments hired me and gave me grants over the years for several projects. People in official drug policy positions used my work in ways that made my heart soar like an eagle. Some in the drug establishment--I'll mention several as the book rolls along--are among the sanest people I know. And there's a new generation who found inspiration in my work and now carry projects forward in ways I'd never have imagined possible. They give me some hope for the future.

So why, if it's been such an interesting personal and professional career, am I writing a book to show the workings of a colossal and needless failure of more than thirty years duration? The gap between our drug warriors' claims of success and reality yawns so wide at this point that criticisms echo from all points of the political compass. As I write this, in 2006, it's a cliché to say that the War on Drugs has failed. Not just *has* failed. It *started* failing right at the beginning, when President Nixon declared it in 1971.

How did this happen? How did so many interesting people working on such an important issue fail to change a terrible government policy and the distorted public opinion that demanded and supported it?

I'd like to answer this question before I leave the field. Maybe a generation or two from now something I write here will be of use.

I'm not going to try and write a comprehensive review of the substance abuse field. It would depress me at this point in life and make my early old age miserable. Plenty of others have done or are doing that anyway. I'll describe a few examples in the end notes in case you want to read some real scholarship.

What I *am* going to try and write is an intellectual memoir, literary and academic jargon for a bunch of stories in the ever more fashionable first person singular. The stories will feature my own experiences as a researcher, a treatment and policy adviser, and now and again a user of chemicals

that are illegal. “Intellectual memoir” isn’t really the right label. The phrase feels too pretentious, like putting on black tie and tails to go to a rock concert sponsored by Monty Python. A colleague suggested that a better phrase would be the title of the recent movie, *What the Bleep Do We Know?*

The real title of the book, *Dope Double Agent*, refers to several things at once. Dope means heroin, first of all, since that’s the kind of drug problem I’ve mostly worked on, but it also means other drugs as well. It’s an ambiguous term, to say the least. The ambiguity is part of the reason the War on Drugs has failed, since the warriors never did get clear on just what the drug dragons were that they were supposed to slay.

But dope also refers to me, to my naiveté about the drug field, about how hide-bound it was--and is--in its preconceptions, and how powerful were--and are--the political forces that hold those hidebound preconceptions in place. With time I became less of a dope and more of a savvy insider. At least that’s what I hope the stories in this book will show. In fact, that change, from dope through enlightenment to cynical dreamer, maps the arc of character that defines the trajectory of the book and, with any luck, the screenplay that David Lynch will ask me to write when it’s time to make the movie.

The double agent part of the title means what it says, just like in a John Le Carré novel, though with a major twist at the end of the definition. As a professional ethnographer, my job was to explore a different world, learn its language and customs, and report back to a mainly middle/upper-middle class white professional audience much like myself. The closest relative to this kind of work in the substance abuse field were the undercover cops. We were the agents sent from the straight world to the street world to learn how it worked. The cops pretended to be of that world and succeeded to the extent they arrested the people they learned from. People like me worked in the open--the street world knew who we were--and we succeeded to the extent we helped make better policy and offer better services.

In spite of their differences, undercover cops and street ethnographers shared a view, rare in the drug field. We all believed that action, whether arrest *or* treatment, without intimate knowledge of the drug-using world, it just made no sense at all. And yet that’s how most of the field worked--action *without* any first-hand knowledge. That’s *the* major reason our policy failed--knowing naught whereof we spoke, to put it in sort of a biblical way.

I wasn’t just an agent, though; I was a *double* agent, because I didn’t just report what I found out. As time went on, I worked more and more to subvert the very assumptions that my controllers sent me out to support. But here’s the twist in the usual double agent job. I didn’t work *for* drug users to plant *dis*information into the world of the drug warriors, like a dope double agent literally would. The drug warriors already worked in a world of disinformation that they had produced for themselves. I couldn’t have done much more to distort it if I’d tried.

No, my double agent job was to infiltrate the drug field with more *accurate* information than they had ever had before, information they didn’t want because it contradicted the false premises of their policy. I was trying to correct the disinformation they believed to be true, not add to it. To use the trendy phrase, I tried to speak truth to power. Power, it turned out, didn’t really give a shit. Actually, when I did speak, power found it kind of annoying. They had a number of ways of neutralizing what I said. And truth, it turned out, moved around with changing times.

So, the double agent of the book title is a little different from the Le Carré protagonist. Like the spy novel, he is “one of us” sent to an alien world to bring back information about it. And like the spy novel, he uses his one of us position to change what his fellow insiders think about that alien

world in ways that subvert their frameworks. But unlike the classic double agent, he doesn't plant *dis*information; he tries to replace it with *good* information. A double agent, in this version, works to replace delusion with truth rather than supporting the delusion as he is asked to do.

By the end of my dope double agent career, I'd won a couple of battles to correct disinformation and lost most of them. But almost always I did interesting work that had personal and intellectual value, though usually it didn't make a damn bit of difference as far as policy or practice went.

In spite of the good news, though, when I look back on the substance abuse field? The center of policy, treatment and research in the U.S. over the last thirty-some years? What a disaster. What a waste of money. What a waste of time. Things are worse now than they've ever been. Like former President Clinton, the drug field always took a puff, but it never inhaled.

It gets to you after a decade or two. And I'm not the only one. Awhile ago I walked out of the Parklawn building in Rockville, Maryland, with a recently retired veteran of the government drug establishment. Parklawn rises from the landscape with three ugly boxy towers that look like the wrapping that fast food franchises come in. The building pulses with pale people hurrying through antiseptic corridors lit by neon tubes. The place made me imagine that civil servants were actually elements in the circulatory system of an alien monster. In a massive dose of architectural irony, Parklawn contains many of the government offices that deal with health and human services.

My peaceful retired colleague, no longer bound by survival or schedule to the building or anyone in it, craned his neck to take in the full height of the walls as we left a meeting at the National Institute on Drug Abuse. He was one of the sanest people inside the drug establishment, and I think he's one of the sanest outside it now. But, at that moment, he turned his head towards me. His eyes were wide and something flew out of them like icy foam from a fire extinguisher.

"You know," I remember him saying, "I come back now that I don't work here anymore and I wish I had an AK-47 so that I could blast this building full of holes."

What kind of field is it that can turn a peaceful person like him into a fantasy killer, of a building no less. What makes a person who tried his best to understand a world and provide help to its suffering occupants turn so bitter and angry? What kind of field is it that chews up a moral, dedicated person like him and spits him out like a wad of tobacco?

I'd like to dedicate this book to my colleague and many other veterans of the War on Drugs. The good ones, and there were many, tried their best to win the battle and *lose* that goddamned war and replace it with something that made more sense. They failed. So did I. We were the good guys. This book will try and figure out why we lost and how some future good guys might do better.

I experimented with different theories as I drafted this book. None of them worked quite right, since they made me write too many things that weren't the point of what I wanted to do here.

Then I noticed a line about the emperor's new clothes and realized I'd never read the original fairy tale. My parents tried to educate me. They bought me a series of children's classics, but all I wanted to read were the *Hardy Boys* and biographies of race car drivers.

So I went to the web to read the original story about the naked emperor, *The Emperor's New Suit*, written in 1837. It struck me as being a clearer model for what I'm trying to say than anything I've read lately in the academic literature, so I'm going to reprint it. The theory that drives the stories to come is the Andersonian theory of power and perception as developed in a story for children. Here it is.

Many, many years ago lived an emperor, who thought so much of new clothes that he spent all his money in order to obtain them; his only ambition was to be always well dressed. He did not care for his soldiers, and the theatre did not amuse him; the only thing, in fact, he thought anything of was to drive out and show a new suit of clothes. He had a coat for every hour of the day; and as one would say of a king "He is in his cabinet," so one could say of him, "The emperor is in his dressing-room."

The great city where he resided was very gay; every day many strangers from all parts of the globe arrived. One day two swindlers came to this city; they made people believe that they were weavers, and declared they could manufacture the finest cloth to be imagined. Their colors and patterns, they said, were not only exceptionally beautiful, but the clothes made of their material possessed the wonderful quality of being invisible to any man who was unfit for his office or unpardonably stupid.

"That must be wonderful cloth," thought the emperor. "If I were to be dressed in a suit made of this cloth I should be able to find out which men in my empire were unfit for their places, and I could distinguish the clever from the stupid. I must have this cloth woven for me without delay." And he gave a large sum of money to the swindlers, in advance, that they should set to work without any loss of time. They set up two looms, and pretended to be very hard at work, but they did nothing whatever on the looms. They asked for the finest silk and the most precious gold-cloth; all they got they did away with, and worked at the empty looms till late at night.

"I should very much like to know how they are getting on with the cloth," thought the emperor. But he felt rather uneasy when he remembered that he who was not fit for his office could not see it. Personally, he was of opinion that he had nothing to fear, yet he thought it advisable to send somebody else first to see how matters stood. Everybody in the town knew what a remarkable quality the stuff possessed, and all were anxious to see how bad or stupid their neighbors were.

"I shall send my honest old minister to the weavers," thought the emperor. "He can judge best how the stuff looks, for he is intelligent, and nobody understands his office better than he."

The good old minister went into the room where the swindlers sat before the empty looms. "Heaven preserve us!" he thought, and opened his eyes wide, "I cannot see anything at all," but he did not say so. Both swindlers requested him to come near, and asked him if he did not admire the exquisite pattern and the beautiful colors, pointing to the empty looms. The poor old minister tried his very best, but he could see nothing, for there was nothing to be seen. "Oh dear," he thought, "can I be so stupid? I should never have thought so, and nobody must know it! Is it possible that I am not fit for my office? No, no, I cannot say that I was unable to see the cloth."

"Now, have you got nothing to say?" said one of the swindlers, while he pretended to be busily weaving.

“Oh, it is very pretty, exceedingly beautiful,” replied the old minister looking through his glasses. “What a beautiful pattern, what brilliant colors! I shall tell the emperor that I like the cloth very much.”

“We are pleased to hear that,” said the two weavers, and described to him the colors and explained the curious pattern. The old minister listened attentively, that he might relate to the emperor what they said; and so he did.

Now the swindlers asked for more money, silk and gold-cloth, which they required for weaving. They kept everything for themselves, and not a thread came near the loom, but they continued, as hitherto, to work at the empty looms.

Soon afterwards the emperor sent another honest courtier to the weavers to see how they were getting on, and if the cloth was nearly finished. Like the old minister, he looked and looked but could see nothing, as there was nothing to be seen.

“Is it not a beautiful piece of cloth?” asked the two swindlers, showing and explaining the magnificent pattern, which, however, did not exist.

“I am not stupid,” said the man. “It is therefore my good appointment for which I am not fit. It is very strange, but I must not let any one know it;” and he praised the cloth, which he did not see, and expressed his joy at the beautiful colors and the fine pattern. “It is very excellent,” he said to the emperor.

Everybody in the whole town talked about the precious cloth. At last the emperor wished to see it himself, while it was still on the loom. With a number of courtiers, including the two who had already been there, he went to the two clever swindlers, who now worked as hard as they could, but without using any thread.

“Is it not magnificent?” said the two old statesmen who had been there before. “Your Majesty must admire the colors and the pattern.” And then they pointed to the empty looms, for they imagined the others could see the cloth.

“What is this?” thought the emperor, “I do not see anything at all. That is terrible! Am I stupid? Am I unfit to be emperor? That would indeed be the most dreadful thing that could happen to me.”

“Really,” he said, turning to the weavers, “your cloth has our most gracious approval;” and nodding contentedly he looked at the empty loom, for he did not like to say that he saw nothing. All his attendants, who were with him, looked and looked, and although they could not see anything more than the others, they said, like the emperor, “It is very beautiful.” And all advised him to wear the new magnificent clothes at a great procession which was soon to take place. “It is magnificent, beautiful, excellent,” one heard them say; everybody seemed to be delighted, and the emperor appointed the two swindlers “Imperial Court weavers.”

The whole night previous to the day on which the procession was to take place, the swindlers pretended to work, and burned more than sixteen candles. People should see that they were busy to finish the emperor’s new suit. They pretended to take the cloth from the loom, and worked about in the air with big scissors, and sewed with needles without thread, and said at last: “The emperor’s new suit is ready now.”

The emperor and all his barons then came to the hall; the swindlers held their arms up as if they held something in their hands and said: "These are the trousers!" "This is the coat!" and "Here is the cloak!" and so on. "They are all as light as a cobweb, and one must feel as if one had nothing at all upon the body; but that is just the beauty of them."

"Indeed!" said all the courtiers; but they could not see anything, for there was nothing to be seen.

"Does it please your Majesty now to graciously undress," said the swindlers, "that we may assist your Majesty in putting on the new suit before the large looking-glass?"

The emperor undressed, and the swindlers pretended to put the new suit upon him, one piece after another; and the emperor looked at himself in the glass from every side.

"How well they look! How well they fit!" said all. "What a beautiful pattern! What fine colors! That is a magnificent suit of clothes!"

The master of the ceremonies announced that the bearers of the canopy, which was to be carried in the procession, were ready.

"I am ready," said the emperor. "Does not my suit fit me marvelously?" Then he turned once more to the looking-glass, that people should think he admired his garments.

The chamberlains, who were to carry the train, stretched their hands to the ground as if they lifted up a train, and pretended to hold something in their hands; they did not like people to know that they could not see anything.

The emperor marched in the procession under the beautiful canopy, and all who saw him in the street and out of the windows exclaimed: "Indeed, the emperor's new suit is incomparable! What a long train he has! How well it fits him!" Nobody wished to let others know he saw nothing, for then he would have been unfit for his office or too stupid. Never were emperor's clothes were more admired.

"But he has nothing on at all," said a little child at last. "Good heavens! listen to the voice of an innocent child," said the father, and one whispered to the other what the child had said. "But he has nothing on at all," cried at last the whole people. That made a deep impression upon the emperor, for it seemed to him that they were right; but he thought to himself, "Now I must bear up to the end." And the chamberlains walked with still greater dignity, as if they carried the train which did not exist.

Anderson's fairy tale summarizes the essentials of how something as wrong as the War on Drugs could continue for decades.

Power--the emperor--said something was true that was obviously false. History is littered with examples of emperors saying dumb things. But in the fairy tale there's a trick. A meta-message goes with the message and insures that the delusion continues even in the face of obvious contradictions. The trick is an evaluation that negates what the critic says even as he speaks. If you,

the courtier or commoner, don't see the truth of what the emperor says, then you are stupid or incompetent, or possibly both.

You have to believe the emperor's lie. If you don't, you are not a person whose voice matters anyway.

Can you handle that assault on your identity? Is the truth worth pulling the plug on your self-esteem and listening to the scorn of your neighbors? Can you handle social suicide? Will anyone in the kingdom ever deal with a stupid and incompetent person like you again? Will the emperor's guard march you to the square to chants of "off with your head?"

The fairy tale shows how to guarantee the life of a lie--wrap it right in the beginning in personal survival and self esteem.

Some famous social psychological experiments make the same point. In the Asch experiment, a stooge walks into a room where everyone else is in on the game. The experimenter holds up a card with three lines and asks which two are similar. Everyone else in the room says two lines that are really different are the same. What does the stooge do? More often than not, he sweats and stammers and goes along with the crowd.

In the famous Milgram experiment, designed to show that no American would ever act like a Nazi concentration camp guard, the experimenter tells the stooge to turn up the voltage on the shock a person gets because he makes a mistake on what they called a learning experiment. The person might even be shouting "please God no" or words to that effect familiar to most readers from a viewing of any *Sopranos* episode. The shock victim is of course faking it; he's in on the game. And what does our stooge do? More often than not, he turns up the juice and listens to the person scream some more.

In the Asch experiment it's peer pressure. In the Milgram study it's authority. In both cases it's the same as the fairy tale--fearing to say what you see because, if you do, it proves you're incompetent or stupid, just like those who couldn't see the emperor's new suit.

The trick only works if everyone goes along with the delusion.

In the fairy tale a child finally speaks up, a child too young to worry about what others think of his competence and intelligence. As Einstein said, "The pursuit of truth and beauty is a sphere of activity in which we are permitted to remain children all our lives." The child speaks up at just the right time. He is the straw that breaks the delusion's back. Adults all along the parade route finally say it out loud. The emperor is naked.

And what does the emperor do? He takes this as a challenge and plunges on ahead. It is now more important than ever that he believe his own delusion. His courtiers follow suit. Even as more and more commoners along the parade route speak the truth, power--naked power, literally--marches on.

The conclusion of the fairy tale describes U.S. drug policy as it is right now, as I write this book. The crowds whisper, loudly, that the emperor has no suit, but the emperor and his courtiers march bravely on. The emperor--not the crowd--is incompetent and stupid, but he still has the power to run the kingdom, and he isn't about to give any of it up.

Anderson's fairy tale is about the drug field. But it isn't just about the drug field. It is about a world full of naked emperors and a world full of subjects who are too afraid to say what they see. If the commoners band together and whisper, or even shout, the emperor pays them no heed. Take a look around, whether you're a bible-banging neo-con or the last of the godless commies or somewhere in between. Health care is a disaster. Education is a wreck. The income gap is growing. Good jobs are disappearing. Iraq is a catastrophe. On and on goes the list, *not* of politically motivated complaints from the left or the right, but rather of real problems that the emperor doesn't see and that his loyal subjects refuse to speak of.

What we're missing, to complete the analogy, are the *swindlers*, the unscrupulous figures in Anderson's fairy tale who start the delusion rolling with their scam. They are the critical players in this game. They plant the notion that the cloth is beautiful and that anyone who can't see it is incompetent or stupid. They dupe the emperor, tap into the circuits of his power, and through his authority bring the rest of the kingdom into the delusion as well.

Who are the swindlers in drug policy? Who are those con artists who came to town and sold the emperor a bill of goods?

Here the analogy breaks down. It would be easy to keep the parallel going if we could find a swindler or two, and God knows there have been some who qualify for the job. But even the worst of them weren't all *that* powerful. They couldn't have produced and maintained such a catastrophe single-handed. They were just vehicles for something larger.

So is the swindler some evil force that lurks in the hearts of humanity, something that only The Shadow knows? Or do we explain drug war delusions and their consequences with a string of conspiratorial and paranoid "they's."

The swindler is elusive because, in spite of the American preference for finding the *person* responsible for any given problem, there just isn't any one person. The naked emperor of the War on Drugs is a distorted *way of seeing* backed by power, but it is not a particular swindler conning a king. It is a framework built over time, a framework that uses *science* and *medicine* to serve *political* ends. The swindler is a historical demon that the powerful call up to delude their public. There aren't many individual villains in the story. There's mostly just that demon.

A rabbi told me a story in Israel, years ago when I helped out with a workshop on drug policy in Jerusalem.

A rabbi lies on his deathbed. His students are lined up along the wall, the smartest at his head, the dumbest down at the end of the line past his feet. The smart student leans over and says, "Rabbi, before you go, leave us with some final words of wisdom."

The rabbi opens his eyes, a little annoyed, and whispers, "Life is like a river."

The second smartest student taps the smart student on the shoulder and says, "What did he say? What did he say?"

The smart student tells him, and so it goes all the way down the line, one student telling the next-smartest student next to him what the rabbi said.

Finally the rabbi's words get to the end of the line, to the stupidest student of all. He listens, wrinkles his brow, and asks the student who just repeated the rabbi's words, "Well, ok, but *why* is life like a river?"

Back up the line goes the stupid student's question until it reaches the smartest student, still standing next to the rabbi's pillow.

"Er uh Rabbi," he says, "Can you tell us *why* life is like a river?"

The rabbi opens his eyes again. Now he's really annoyed. He's just trying to die a peaceful death.

He looks up at the smartest student and says, "Ok, so maybe life *isn't* like a river." Then he closes his eyes and dies.

I've always been the stupid student at the end of the line. So have the double agents I've known, in the drug field or in any other. So was the child who said the emperor was naked. It's a dangerous job, because sometimes they throw you out of the school. And it's an embarrassing job, because sometimes the question you ask really is stupid.

We're the ones who notice that the emperor isn't wearing any clothes. But then we have to figure out how to say that out loud so that it has a chance of being heard. We don't have any power, and by saying what we say we're tagged as stupid and incompetent. We have to figure out how to take the details of a moment and smuggle in some truth in the hope that it undermines the lies. That's the double agent's job.

A child got the timing right in Anderson's fairy tale and the truth spread. It didn't make a damn bit of difference to the emperor in the story, though, he just kept marching on. What I wonder, what this book wonders about the War on Drugs is, what happens next? At the end, everyone's saying the emperor is naked and, instead of changing how he sees things, the emperor decides that it is now more important than ever for him to maintain the delusion.

That's exactly where the drug field is now. The emperor is more and more isolated but keeps marching on. We need an ending to the tale. In the conclusion of the book, I'll try to write one.

I'm as worn out as my colleague, the one I described earlier who wanted to spray the Parklawn building with an AK-47. I seem to go in 13 year cycles, not exactly an auspicious number. I quit the field the first time in the early 1980s, when a national committee made me feel like I needed to wear a mattress on my back and hinges on my heels. That particular story will be told in due course. And as I write this book I'm quitting the second round, from the early 90s to the mid-00s, another 13 years, but this time it wasn't a national committee that piled on the delusions that broke the agent's back. This time it was a trip, a few years ago. The frustrations of my double agent job washed me out to existential sea, once and for all. I wrote about the trip on my way home and thought about sending what I wrote to a magazine. But I knew the essay was an ending, and I wasn't quite done then. Now I am.

The trip? I went to Paris to see a couple of guys about some drugs. We're addicted to drugs, my French colleagues and I--as a research topic, not as a chemical we smoke, snort or shoot. We're

all *why* junkies, like the stupid student at the Rabbi's bedside--why these people and not those people, why in this place but not over there, why now and not earlier? We've all been in the business a long time and think we've figured out some answers. We all want to do something with what we've learned. And we're all pretty much ready to start drinking, heavily, because of knowledge and *lack* of power, Foucault turned sideways and squared. We're all aging double agents, and we're all tired of failing at our jobs.

I sat in Rodolphe's apartment in the Marais neighborhood of Paris one Sunday afternoon, his two little kids crawling all over ma femme Ellen, his wife showing us pictures of Paris street scenes--of addicts, ironically enough--that she had taken as a professional photographer. Rodolphe is a rare blend, a psychiatrist and ethnographer, who knows more crack addicts than he does medical colleagues. He sat slumped in his chair, sad eyes directed at his half-filled glass of sauterne. "Politics," he muttered, to no one in particular.

Rodolphe and I both do a kind of research that's gotten a lot more popular over the last twenty years. It doesn't look much like laboratory science. Its basic premise is, if you're interested in some corner of the world, you climb inside it and spend time with its inhabitants. Another premise is, you look for connections, among the pieces of that world and between that world and the rest of the city, the country, the planet.

The problem is, when politicians come to people like Rodolphe, they want a fragment of information, usually a fragment that confirms their preconceived notions. They don't want to hear about a complicated corner of the world, how it came about, why it's there, and what it feels like to live in it. They don't want to understand the situation before they act; they want to act on what the situation must be since they have already decided what it is. So the policy makers come and ask Rodolphe to carve out a sound bite for a question they have that already misses the point. We've both been asked many times to do this. We've both given it a try, as I'll show you later in the book--anything to start the conversation. I went to talk with Rodolphe because I thought maybe he'd figured out how to lead them to water *and* make them drink, but he was as burned out as I was.

Imagine you are an American running a corporation. You decide to open a branch in France. You hire an American intercultural communicator to help you with product design, marketing, human relations, management. He knows nothing about France, speaks no French, and spends his first week at a Hilton with one field trip to EuroDisney. Does this make any sense? That's the situation that the drug field is in, experts building bridges into worlds about which they know little.

The next day, Monday, I dropped down into the Paris Metro and headed for the outer reaches of the city, the far Northeast, to visit Alain. Years ago he worked on economic development in the Andean region of South America where he discovered the coca plant. He became fascinated with drugs in general, especially with how they were grown and manufactured and moved around the global market. He founded a newsletter, the *Observatoire Geopolitique des Drogues*, a direct report of the trafficking business, from plant to street, with contributions from dozens of local correspondents.

I surfaced into a neighborhood several notches below the St. Germain area where tourists find little hotels on quiet side streets. Alain had located in a low-rent ground floor office, basically to go out of business. He looks like an eccentric scholar, rumpled hair and a shaggy sweater, and he leads me into a room filled with scattered piles of papers. He gestures at half-empty shelves and says they've sold most of the books to pay off debts.

Alain has annoyed governments for years with his irreverent, but accurate, reports of drug trafficking in several countries. But this time he went too far with an article about a government official. With all the delicate issues around that country's role in the European Union, the French system all of a sudden went formal on him. The long arm of the auditor knocked on his door and told him he could do all the projects he wanted, but he couldn't use any money to pay for space and equipment to do them. The *Observatoire Geopolitique des Drogues* is no more.

Imagine you're an investor, and you want to put your money where it will turn the most profit. You hire a consultant who can tell you the comparative prices of fast food on the commercial street a block away. But he knows nothing about new and developing markets, the comparative strengths and weaknesses of companies currently carving out a niche, or the potential demand for their products. Does this make any more sense than the intercultural communicator you hired? Yet once again, that's the situation the drug field is in, unaware of how and why illicit drugs turn up at certain places at certain times, and most importantly, what might be coming down the pike.

Well, in the land of trendy social theorists like Foucault, Bourdieu and Baudrillard, I'd expected more than this. My Parisian colleagues were no better off than I. Why is it so hard to tell the straight story in the drug field? Why is the naked emperor still parading around? I know why, and I wedged myself into the Air France flight home with eight and a half hours to think it over. I rounded up the usual villains, but two of them spun around in my mind. *Medicine* and *politics*.

Medicine treats *humans*, any human, it doesn't matter where or when. To a doctor you're a standard model machine. A liver is a liver. But drug use clusters among *social types*. More than a century of history and not a single counterexample. Over the span of the last century, consider who were the opiate addicts in the U.S.--middle class housewives around the turn of the twentieth century, White immigrant men or their kids in the 1920's, African-Americans and Hispanics in the northern cities in the 1960's, White suburban youth in the nineties. Of course the correlation is never perfect, but as correlations go, you'd have to put a bag over your head to miss it. At any particular period in history, in any particular place, problems with particular illegal drugs surface among some kinds of people and not among others.

This social clustering is one reason why Durkheim invented sociology in the 19th century. Think of suicide. What could be more of an individual act? And therefore, what could be more obvious than to seek an explanation *inside* the individual? The question is, why does a *person* commit suicide?

Misleading question. There's another level here. If it's only about the individual, then why--asked Durkheim--do Catholics do it less than Protestants? The details of his answer need not detain us. What matters here is the fact of social clusters. Suicide is not only--or even mostly--an individual act. It has more to do with where you sit in the social landscape.

Same with drug use.

As long as a drug problem is an *individual* problem, a *medical* problem to boot, matters of biography, situation, social group, history and political economy simply wash out of the picture. A drug problem turns into a universal human problem, a matter of biology rather than society. A drug abuser is sick. He has, as official policy now puts it, a brain disease. It could happen to anyone with a brain.

An *addict*, a truly dependent person who organizes his or her life around a chemical, *does* have a drug problem. No question about it. An addict has become physically dependent on externally driven neurotransmitters to the point where internal systems are out of whack. But the fact is, if you line all the addicts up and stand back a few yards, you notice that most of them in the line have something in common--they are all different examples of a very few social categories. The categories will change with time, but there will always be only a few.

It can't just be a medical problem if it affects some social types more than others. Why don't we notice? Here's where the politics comes in. What we *do* notice isn't a universal human problem in medical terms. What we notice are, in fact, the social types.

Sometimes we notice when the drug serves some kind of political purpose. Drugs are great for what I call chemical scapegoating. The anthropologist Levi-Strauss once described totemism by saying "animals are good to think with." Drugs, on the other hand, are good to *blame* with.

The long list of cases that illustrate chemical scapegoating is embarrassing. In the U.S. we can go back to the turn of the century and see how the first anti-drug laws, against opium, were passed to go after the Chinese in the western part of the country. Cocaine among the "Negroes" in the south became a campaign right around the same time as the lynchings, the strange fruit that Billie Holliday sang of. The marijuana laws of the 1930's, something the infamous Harry Anslinger of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics didn't want to touch, made it over the hurdle because western agriculture no longer needed Mexican labor during the Depression. The protestors of the 1960's, the commie kids running around burning flags and bras and draft cards? Drug abusers. The humiliating war in Vietnam, the first big loss by the U.S. since it turned into a global power? The grunts were dope fiends.

The political spotlight shines on social clusters. Drugs become a political issue because the cluster, *not* the drug, leaps into the foreground as a problem, a threat, a social group to worry about.

It's easier to ignore the real problem and go after the drug. Drugs are good to blame with.

But the opposite is also possible. A group of people, a social cluster, do indeed have a rip-roaring drug problem, but no one gives a damn. Jill Jonnes, a historian writing about the heroin epidemic among African-Americans in the 1960's, reports that two federal officials said exactly the same thing when explaining why government didn't respond to the heroin epidemic, primarily among poor urban minorities, until late in the game. "No one gave a shit," they both said. A few years back Congress asked the Government Accounting Office to find out about the crack epidemic. Why, with all the drug research and law enforcement and treatment machinery in place, didn't the country know that a crack epidemic was underway in impoverished African-American neighborhoods? Same question, same answer, no one gave a shit, until a world class basketball player overdosed on cocaine a few miles away from Capitol Hill.

A drug-using cluster might be invisible for another reason as well. Consider the recent epidemic of heroin experimentation among white suburban youth. It's common knowledge now, but when it first took off in the mid-1990s, it was difficult to get the suburban adults to notice. "Not our kids," was the response. Heroin is a problem for *those* people, the ones who live in the city, the ones we moved to the suburbs to avoid. Denial works as well as its cousin, indifference, to ignore social clusters.

Drugs either explain why the cluster is a problem, or drugs remain invisible because the cluster remains invisible. Drug dependence carries such a heavy political and emotional load that no

one wants to hear what *really* goes on in the worlds where they're used. It's exactly the nature of those worlds that my French colleagues Rodolphe and Alain wanted to understand.

But to really understand, uncomfortable truths must be made explicit, for it is in those corners of a society--the corners where a disproportionate number of people take the chemical high road--where social, economic and political blemishes become visible. You can't understand and explain an intoxicated corner of a society without a critique of the larger society that produced the historical conditions that make that corner the place that it is. That, needless to say, isn't what the politicians want to hear. So they turn to *medicine*. Medicine doesn't talk about society; it talks about sick brains.

Delusions in the drug field are a many-layered thing, more complicated than Hans Christian Anderson's fairy tale. *Politically*, social clusters are where the action is, whether you're using drugs to demonize them or avoiding drugs because you don't care about them or denying drugs because "they" are "us."

But once you do aim the drug field at a social cluster, *medicine* takes command. Medicine says this isn't about social clusters. This is about the universal human machine. This is about a sick person who needs to be cured. By combining politics and medicine, you can go after a social cluster and deny you're doing so at the same time. The public and their political leaders go after a group for one reason or another. Then they turn it over to the doctors who, by definition, don't go after any specific group at all. It's a match made in heaven for social control.

The next problem takes us from those who use to those who sell. *Trafficking* is a major ingredient in the epidemic stew--not the drug markets on the street corner, what the public often thinks of when they hear the phrase drug dealer. I mean the big leagues--the Arnold Rothstein's, Lucky Luciano's, Ma Triad's, Khun Sha's, the Pablo Escobar's--the organizational geniuses and marketing experts who connect plants and laboratories with consumers and make a fortune in the process.

Small-timers can change opium to morphine or cook up a little crack or speed. But drugs like no. 4 heroin and cocaine hydrochloride and crystal methamphetamine aren't so simple to mass-produce. The big guys run in areas like these, where sophisticated equipment and technical expertise and illegal regents get organized into big business to ready the product for market. They may coordinate the accumulation of large stocks of raw plant material or chemicals, fund the big labs that convert it, run major shipments from one country to another, or perhaps all three. Drug epidemics in the U.S. are kick-started by major changes in production and distribution that set up the conditions that make a new epidemic possible.

How do the big guys get away with this? More to the point, how do we *let* them get away with this? The stories are enough to fill a citizen--of many different states--with shame. My colleague Alain Labrousse tells--used to tell--these stories in his newsletter. Southeast Asia isn't a bad example, considering the country I was visiting, France, and the country I call home, the U.S. Both countries have dismal histories in Vietnam. In the days of Indochina, French security forces aided and profited from the opium trade. When the U.S. took on the war, American intelligence assisted with transport. Worse, when our South Vietnamese allies became major distributors, we looked the other way.

The stories go on and on, in several different countries. Harry Anslinger, of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, shamelessly played to post-World War II anti-communist hysteria, accusing the Chinese and Cubans of trafficking, when the major problem was Turkey and Marseilles. Widespread corruption in law enforcement in several countries, including our own, provided insulated conduits through which product could flow. Colombia and Mexico are now called “narco-states,” and a colleague from Central America showed me a news clipping announcing the election of a “narcodiputado,” “narco-legislator.” In the 1980s U.S. support of Afghan guerillas was tied up with increased trafficking of heroin. Many books have been written to show how the Iran-Contra era provided an umbrella under which cocaine shipments arrived in the U.S.

To these stories could be added others in many more countries, stories of how trafficking serves political interests, how corruption buys safe havens for those in the business, how this lucrative and powerful global industry offers incentives that would stun the imagination of an old fashioned robber baron from the nineteenth century. The problem with these stories, as Alain knows, is that you can’t tell them without causing diplomatic earthquakes and national scandals, exposing the moral guardians as villains, and depriving political movements of their revenue.

Yet availability, as it is usually called, is a favorite explanation of why drug epidemics occur. But our usual understanding of availability starts with the user and stops with the low-level dealer who stands on the corner a block away. That’s like trying to understand global transportation by visiting the truck rental lot up the street. If treatment people knew what the markets were doing, they might at least have some lead time to prepare, intervene early and often in the right places, and reduce the damage. If law enforcement knew, they might more effectively disrupt markets in the making by arresting their organizational center. But neither of these “if’s” have a chance, if the story can’t be told. And who, Alain would ask, will tolerate facts that cause national scandals and international diplomatic crises?

I order another glass of Air France’s vin du pays Catalan and wish I could smoke a cigarette--my two favorite drugs that are much worse in net global damage than heroin or cocaine. The Maritime Provinces skid by below the flight. My two colleagues in Paris are as worn out as I am. I had hoped for new approaches from Rodolphe, but he felt as frustrated as I do. I had wanted to do research in Alain’s unique archives, but he was selling them to pay the rent.

Why did I have to go to France to figure this out? Does your thinking really change as soon as you pass through customs at Charles de Gaulle? It seems so obvious. Good intervention requires a connection to the world of users, but to truly understand that world, you also have to understand a corner of the society in which they live and the national and global forces that created it. It really doesn’t matter what kind of state it is, authoritarian or democratic, controlled or free markets. And to understand why that corner exists, you must document that society’s failings. Why would substantial numbers of people lose control over drugs--illegal or legal--unless something was seriously wrong with how they lived? And why would something be seriously wrong for so many in some social clusters and not in others? Something clearly went haywire between that cluster and that society. This is not a conclusion that those who run societies want to hear.

And why do powerful distribution systems develop and continue to exist? Everyone knows who the main actors are and how they work. Just read the paper. It, too, seems so obvious. The systems arise because of greed and continue to exist because they are wrapped in layers of protection, some of it born of fear of retribution, some of it, of corruption among the powerful. Lay out an accurate description of a trafficking system and you’ve laid out a national scandal or two and some

international crises. You may also have written your own death warrant, as threats and violence against journalists who venture into this dangerous territory have shown.

So if you can't get funded and you might get shot for getting the story straight, what's a drug expert to do? What many of us have done over the years, double agent style, work the margins, push the edge of the envelope, support action to help out at least some of the victims, the people who have lost control of a life to chemistry. We become double agent characters in an old MASH rerun. We help patch up the casualties so they can go back out and get shot. We toss down homebrew in The Swamp to forget that the basic problem isn't getting solved and that there's not much we can do about solving it. We have to do better than this. Even if we fail, we owe it to the millions of chemical casualties to at least fail for the right reasons, not because we can't get the story straight.

I'm leaving the drug field, again, after a second long thirteen-year stretch. I'm losing the detachment that lets me work as a double agent. It's time to change the intellectual scenery, to move on to other things. Now that I've turned sixty, I doubt I'll be back. Sean Connery's final Bond movie was called *Never Say Never*, a play on his earlier decision to quit the role and move on to other things. I suppose something could come up that would draw me back in again. But I doubt it.

Before I cut the psychological umbilical, though, I'd like to leave something behind, for better or for worse, something that pulls together all that experience, or at least some of it. I wish it were as simple as believing that a dope double agent book would make me a lot of money. I know too much about how books and articles work to believe that for a minute. I wish I felt that the book would set off a rousing call for policy reform, in the drug field and elsewhere, based on direct knowledge of what was actually going on in the situations that policy is about. I don't believe that for a minute either. I wish I could think of the whole thing as some kind of therapy, a working out of anger and frustration, like my colleague's fantasy of blasting the Parklawn Building. There's some of that in the book, but not much anymore. Mostly I'm just worn out and need to move on to something more hopeful.

Nope, I really believe I'm writing the thing because I think I *should*. I'd love it if I got rich, set off a policy revolution, and became more attuned to my true inner feelings. But I know better. Odds are a number with many zeros after it to one that none of those things will happen. Jimmy the Greek is laughing in his grave.

It just has to be done. Duty. Dharma. Pflicht. Code of the West. To whom or for what it's not so clear.

So how did a nice 1960s grad student like me wind up in a place like this? A story starts, like Aristotle said, with a beginning, a complication in life shared by many of my age-mates, an escalating war in a Southeast Asian country called Vietnam. Kismet handed me a choice between two wars in the late 1960s. I was lucky enough to have the chance to enroll in one that claimed it was trying to help rather than trying to destroy. But that claim, as I would soon learn, just sugar-coated the surface of the War on Drugs.