The rise to power and construction of drug trafficking as a foreign threat in the United States

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Abstract: This investigation of U.S. anti-drug policy applies international systems theory to show how drug trafficking has become externalized in the minds of Americans. By examining the rise of US power in the early twentieth century and the struggle to enact drug restrictions at the national level, the author explains how the policy became externalized and drug trafficking became a specifically foreign threat. The evolution of anti-drug policy has therefore evolved more as a foreign policy than a domestic one. This helps to explain the characterization of drug restriction in the US as a drug war rather than as a public health matter as is the case in Canada and Western Europe.

Keywords: Drug trafficking; drug war; war on drugs; drug policy; international systems

Introduction
For some time now, support for the U.S. “war on drugs” has been in decline. Recently, the Pew Research Center found that 67 percent of Americans would prefer a policy that focuses more on treatment for those who use illicit drugs such as heroin and cocaine while only 27 percent hold that the government should prosecute the users. (Pew Research Center 2014) Critics hold that it has been ineffective and even counterproductive, and call instead for policies more like those of Canada and Western Europe, which feature the decriminalization of usage and a public health approach that includes treatment programs for drug addicts. Given these changing views, we have to ask why the drug war model continues to dominate our approach to the drug problem in the U.S. Why in fact, has the U.S. waged a drug war while France, Canada and other Western countries have adopted a public health approach to illicit drug usage? Furthermore, why has this policy been so resistant to change?

As we shall see, the approach has dominated our thinking about drug usage for over a hundred years now.

One answer comes from Renee Scherlen who applies the literature of policy termination to explain the persistence of the drug war. Seeing policy termination as “a rare political phenomenon,” she finds that “policies that have missions considered critical by the public and politicians are more impervious to termination” even though the shortfall of the current anti-drug policy is evident. From the standpoint of public opinion, “[p]olicy termination entails risk; the future is an unknown while the present is not.” Furthermore, the longer the policy has been in effect, the more resistant it will be to termination. She notes that even as the Obama administration has modified the current policy to include some level of harm reduction (support for needle exchange programs, for instance), no one in the administration has openly supported policy termination (Scherlen 2012).

Constructivists offer another perspective by focusing on the role of “shared meanings” in the form of “ideas, norms, knowledge, culture, and argument in politics” (Finnemore and Sikkink 2001, 392). In international relations, the advent of policy shocks, failures or crises such as war or depression, often leads to the failure of old policies and identities, and their associated norms. These failures open up space for the development and emergence of new norms. These new norms only succeed as
they address “what are perceived as the most pressing problems facing a country at a particular time” and must somehow accord with “historically formed ideologies or the structure of political discourse of a nation.” Their durability is further assured by their embodiment in institutions particularly those of the state (Finnemore and Sikkink, 392).

Giroux sees the war on drugs is an outgrowth of military culture, which fosters a law and order agenda even as crime rates are decreasing (Giroux 2004, 2011-221). For Johns, the drug war is about heightening government authority with social control as the endpoint (Johns 1992). Corva takes this view a step further in arguing that the war on drugs enables the state to perpetuate the neoliberal model of development while constructing the imprisonment of the poor as the consequence of a “choice” (Corva 2008, 176-193).

Still, we have to wonder how we arrived at this approach to drug usage in the first place and why it differs so markedly from the public health orientation of other Western countries. What I hope to contribute in the remainder of the paper is an explanation of the drug war strategy as an outcome of the dynamics of the international system and the construction of a “national interest” based on held American ideals. This view begins with a “realist” conception of policy making along with a constructivist interpretation of how policy ideals become embedded in popular thinking. For political realists, the nation-state functions within an international arena of competition and potential conflict. Each nation-state is separately constituted and driven to fulfill its own “national interest,” which is to maximize its own power and benefits in relation to its competitors. As Hans Morgenthau has written, the duty of statesmen is to “think and act in terms of the national interest” so as to provide for the safety of the population (Morgenthau 1978, 4-15).

The theory of hegemonic stability, a variation on political realism, posits that the stability of the international system actually depends on the ability of the nation-state with greatest economic capacity to play a leading role. Kindleberger blamed the particular severity of the Great Depression on the unwillingness of the U.S. to take the lead in providing incentives for open trade and facilitating a stable internationalized currency during the interwar years (Kindleberger 1986). Krasner incorporated the nature of the international system and the potential hegemon itself to explain its willingness to assume the role. A great power would be more likely to play the role of hegemonic stabilizing when it was in its ascendant phase and held a substantial economic advantage over the weaker ones. Success in “stabilizing” lay in the achievement of stable open trade under collective defense as provided by the hegemon (Krasner 1976, 317-347). Most accounts of the rise of U.S. hegemony begin with the formation of the UN and other international organizations after World War II. However, efforts by the U.S. to achieve national goals through international cooperation actually began much earlier and included drug restriction conferences in Shanghai in 1909, The Hague in 1912, and through the League of Nations in the 1920s (Bewley-Taylor and Jelsma 2011).

As national drug policy in the U.S. was shaped in conjunction with the U.S. rise to power in the early twentieth century, an international systems approach can provide a new dimension for our understanding of policy making in this case. By embedding the policy making process within the larger context of the international system, we can focus on the critical role that was played by foreign policy leaders in passing an anti-drug policy. The investigation that follows is aimed at showing how, in the process, the country’s drug problem came to be seen as a foreign threat and drug trafficking thereby became externalized in the minds of Americans. This dynamic arising from the international system helps to explain the fundamental difference between U.S. drug policy and those of other Western countries.

In the first section, I look at how the contemporary drug war has been framed by U.S. presidents from Nixon through Obama. I do this by examining major speeches given by these presidents in which they address illegal drug usage. I also look at the report put out by Nixon’s Blue Ribbon Taskforce on Narcotics, Marihuana and Dangerous Drugs, and conversations in 1969 that took place that year as drug policy is being rolled out. In the second section, I go back to the origins of the drug war. Drawing from the work of Anne Foster, Thomas Schoonover, and others I discuss the adoption
of restrictions on opium in the Philippines both to gain international influence and to respond to pressing demands from the international movement for drug reform. In the third section, I discuss the decentralized nature of U.S. governing institutions and the obstacle this poses for the passage a unified national anti-drug policy.

In the final section, I provide a content analysis of the newspaper accounts of the era in an attempt to understand the use of the expressions “drug war” and “war on drugs.” Who first coined these expressions and how were they used? If there was in fact some sort of war going on, who was the enemy and how was this war to be waged? I concentrate my analysis on the years between 1903, the year the Opium Commission was established by Philippines Governor William Howard Taft to investigate the possibility of prohibiting opium, through 1915, the year after the passage of the Harrison Act, a landmark effort to regulate narcotics at the national level. I scan the years afterward through 1969, the year President Nixon revived the expression, for their frequency. The framing of the anti-drug policy in the two eras will be compared.

Declaring the War on Drugs

American presidents from Richard Nixon to Barack Obama have sought public support for the drug war by framing drug usage as an attack on the country. Along the way, an uncompromising law-and-order stand on the issue became an essential part of what it has meant to be an “American.”

The idea of drugs as a threat to American culture appears in the 1969 report by Nixon’s Blue Ribbon Taskforce on Narcotics, Marihuana and Dangerous Drugs. The threat was particularly true for marijuana. While the authors stated that no formal studies on the subject were yet available, “a number of clinicians” had observed that at least some marijuana users “show evidence of loss of conventional motivation.” Chronic users seemed “to prefer instead a non-goal oriented life style, which emphasizes immediate satisfactions to the exclusion of ambition and future planning. The “pothead,” concluded the authors, “may well retard his own chances for emotional growth by not learning how to deal with life stress.” Such desirable traits as “conventional motivation,” “ambition,” and “future planning” were thus under threat from the possibility of a “non-goal oriented lifestyle” and limited “emotional growth.”

The report also pointed to addiction and crime as the products of drug usage and cited Mexico as a chief source country. To stem the flow of marijuana into the U.S., the authors called for major eradication campaigns and the extension of “existing fences along the U.S.-Mexican Border.” It concluded by recommending that the State Department “give no subject higher priority or greater emphasis than the desire of the U.S.” to eradicate “production and refinement of opium poppies and marihuana” in Mexico (United States, 1969).

At a bipartisan meeting on the narcotics that same year, the issue took on a Manichean quality. Arguing for a massive federal role, Nixon likened drug dealing to nuclear weapons: “(W)e have had a Narcotics Bureau for the last 50 years with the tools of 1914 dealing with the nuclear weapons in that field, if I may use an analogy, that are used by organized crime of the 1960s. We have been ridiculously outgunned.” Echoing this sense of alarm, one Senator depicted illegal drug usage an invasion of every American home.

This is a very critical stage in this country. It is in the elementary schools. It is in the junior high schools. It is in the great, broad, white middle class as well as the black ghetto. It is a unique problem of the American Indian. It has just absolutely invaded every home in America. And every parent in America is scared to death to talk to them. They are literally scared to death of what is happening. (Nixon 1969)

Celebrity Art Linkletter referred to as “the idol of most of the people of this country,” also played a role at the meeting. Hoping to popularize the drug war, Nixon appealed to Linkletter to produce an upbeat anti-drug program, “like the FBI story, in other words, investigative programs; people like

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1 This spelling was used by the Federal Government at the time and has since been changed to “marijuana.”
mystery.” He asks, would it not be possible for television not to put on a dull educational program about the evils of marihuana, heroin, ‘speed,’ LSD, and so forth? It would seem to me that some exciting programs on this could have an enormous educational impact on the country (Nixon 1969).

While adopting a more moderate tone, President Jimmy Carter continued to internationalize the drug war. In 1977 he told Congress how eradication efforts in Mexico, Burma, Thailand and Colombia were being bolstered with the help of France, Germany, Britain and the Netherlands. He also broadened the involvement of government departments and agencies, and international organizations like the World Bank, in the drug war through the promotion of development programs such as crop and income substitution. At the same time, Carter also sought to reduce penalties at the federal level for the use of marijuana. Again, in all of this, American values would be put to the test: “(I)t is ultimately the strength of the American people, of our values and our society that will determine whether we can put an end to drug abuse” (Carter 1977).

Ronald Reagan proved especially adept at sounding the alarm, featuring particularly the vulnerability of American children. As he stated in a 1986 address, “Drugs are menacing our society. They're threatening our values and undercutting our institutions. They're killing our children” (Reagan 1986) – although the typical addict was of adult age. On another occasion, he stated, “This administration hereby declares an all-out war on big-time organized crime and the drug racketeers who are poisoning our young people” (Reagan 1983). Even more explicitly, he claimed, “If our crusade against drugs succeeds with our children, we will defeat that scourge all over the country” (Reagan 1987). The notion of the typical victim as a child fortified the perception of the U.S. itself as the innocent and unknowing victim of an attack.

As a prominent advocate of the anti-drug campaign, First Lady Nancy Reagan also spotlighted children. Joining the President in a televised address, she made a starkly polarizing appeal: “Drugs take away the dream from every child's heart and replace it with a nightmare, and it's time we in America stand up and replace those dreams.” Further, “There's no moral middle ground. Indifference is not an option. … For the sake of our children, I implore each of you to be unyielding and inflexible in your opposition to drugs” (Reagan 1986).

Reagan, himself, heightened fear by tying drug usage closely to the threat of communism; again, children were the immediate victims: “Today, Cuba even provides safe passage for drug traffickers who poison our children. In return, of course, Cuba gets hard cash to buy more weapons of war.” (Reagan 1984) In supporting the contra effort to overthrow the leftist Nicaraguan government, he placed American parents on the front line: “I know every American parent concerned about the drug problem will be outraged to learn that top Nicaraguan Government officials are deeply involved in drug trafficking” (Reagan 1986b). By equating the drug war to World War II, Reagan sought to involve the entire country.

My generation will remember how America swung into action when we were attacked in World War II. The war was not just fought by the fellows flying the planes or driving the tanks. It was fought at home by a mobilized nation – men and women alike – building planes and ships, clothing sailors and soldiers, feeding marines and airmen; and it was fought by children planting victory gardens and collecting cans. Well, now we're in another war for our freedom, and it's time for all of us to pull together again.

In addition, Reagan posited the notion of drug use as the very antithesis of the American history. Drawing on the narrative of immigration, he proclaimed, the revolution out of which our liberty was conceived signaled an historical call to an entire world seeking hope. Each new arrival of immigrants rode the crest of that hope. They came, millions seeking a safe harbor from the oppression of cruel regimes. They came, to escape starvation and disease. They came, those surviving the Holocaust and the Soviet gulags. They came, the boat people, chancing death for even a glimmer of hope that they could have a new life. They all came to taste the air redolent and rich with the freedom that is ours. What an insult it will be to what we are and whence we came if we do not rise up together in defiance against this cancer of drugs (emphasis added) (Reagan 1986).
George H. W. Bush also played up the role of parents. Seeking an additional billion dollars for the drug war from Congress in 1989, he began with the words of a suffering mother. Just hours before his inauguration, she had written, "my husband and I received word that our son was addicted to cocaine. He had the world at his feet. Bright, gifted, personable—he could have done anything with his life. And now he has chosen cocaine." The mother had also advised a supply side approach: "And please find a way to curb the supply of cocaine. Get tough with the pushers." Bush closed with a flourish: "The war must be waged on all fronts. Our new drug czar, Bill Bennett, and I will be shoulder to shoulder in the executive branch leading the charge" (Bush 1989b).

Bush also drove home the idea of drug trafficking as an external threat. In defense of the recent U.S. invasion of Panama, he cited the goals of safeguarding American lives, defending democracy in Panama, combating drug trafficking and protecting the integrity of the Panama Canal Treaty. In closing, he noted that the now deposed Manuel Noriega had not only been a dictator, but an "indicted drug trafficker" as well (Bush 1989a).

For President Clinton, the first president of the post-Soviet era, it was no longer possible to pump up support for the drug war by equating it with communism. Choosing instead to associate it with terrorism, he remarked, "We are working with other nations with renewed intensity to fight drug traffickers and to stop terrorists before they act and hold them fully accountable if they do" (Clinton 1997). The following year, he linked drug trafficking both to terrorists and weapons of mass destruction.

We must combat an unholy axis of new threats from terrorists, international criminals, and drug traffickers. These 21st century predators feed on technology and the free flow of information and ideas and people. And they will be all the more lethal if weapons of mass destruction fall into their hands (Clinton 1998).

The drug war took a back seat to the War on Terror during the George W. Bush administration. Illegal drugs were mentioned briefly by President Bush State of the Union speech in 2002 in close association with "homeland security." In an urgent call to make the nation safer, he stated, "Homeland security will make America not only stronger, but, in many ways, better. ... Stronger police and fire departments will mean safer neighborhoods. Stricter border enforcement will help combat illegal drugs" (Bush 2002). The following year, however, Bush appeals for greater funding for treatment programs though this amount still paled in comparison to the amount being spent on enforcement (Bush 2003).

While President Barack Obama has made little mention of illegal drugs in his State of the Union speeches, and has signaled a change in thinking about the illegal drugs. Asked about the federal enforcement in Colorado, Washington and other areas where marijuana has been legalized, he remarked that, "It does not make sense from a prioritization point of view for us to focus on recreational drug users in a state that has already said that under state law that's legal " (Kerlikowske 2015). And while the Office of National Drug Control Policy maintains that the administration "steadfastly opposes legalization of marijuana and other drugs" (Office of National Drug Control Policy 2015), the President has been critical of the practice of criminalizing marijuana usage rather than treating it as a public health problem. Further, "it’s been devastating in a lot of minority communities. It presents the possibility at least of unequal application of the law, and that has to be changed” (Chokshi 2015). At the same time, the President has not been able to resist the urge to conjure up the familiar themes of “drug kingpins, folks involved with violence, people who are peddling hard drugs to our kids in our neighborhoods that are devastated, there is no doubt that we need to go after those folks hard”(Kerlikowske 2015).

More often, however, the task of advocacy for the drug war has fallen to Vice President Joe Biden. In addressing drug trafficking in Central America in a recent New York Times editorial, Biden fell back on the time tested notion of an “invasion”. In making his case, he referred to the “dangerous surge in migration,” which had taken place during the previous summer, “when thousands of unaccompanied children showed up on our southwestern border.” The problem arose only after “transna-
tional criminal networks” had “turned Central America into a hotbed for drug smuggling, human trafficking and financial crime.” As Biden explained, the U.S.-led reconstruction of Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador would be modeled on “Plan Colombia” of the previous era which he cited as a success in combating drug trafficking (Biden 2015).

The idea of illegal drug usage in the U.S. as an “invasion” and the work of external enemies then have survived with just a few variations from one administration to the next. During the Nixon, Reagan, George H.W. Bush and Clinton administrations, drug usage was blamed on Mexico, Cuba, Nicaraguan leftists, Panama’s Manuel Noriega, and terrorists. Reagan even likened the drug war to the U.S. involvement in World War II. By comparison, George W. Bush and Obama have been less strident in talking about the drug war and more inclined to seek alternatives. However, Vice President Biden’s recent use of the politically charged issue of immigration to make his case for extending the drug war suggests that the idea of drug use as a foreign “invasion” continues to resonate with the public.

These presidents were not the first to refer to the war on drugs or to frame drug use as an attack on American values, however. This expression was used as early as 1912 and has endured in American culture since then as I will show through an examination of its usage in news accounts during this era. First, however, I turn to a discussion of the origins of U.S. drug policy after the takeover of the Philippine Islands and the debate that arose over how to manage the sale of opium there. Up to then, both opium and cocaine had been legal at the national level.

The Rise of U.S. Power and the International Anti-Opium Movement

With the annexation of the Philippine Islands in 1898, the U.S. reached a new level of international influence. U.S. Secretary of State John Hay was able to convince the various Western powers to agree to recognize Chinese territorial and administrative sovereignty through an “Open Door” policy, which facilitated an important new trade benefit for the U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt, expressed the urgent need for Chinese markets in 1902.

The welfare of California, Oregon, and Washington is as vital to the nation as the welfare of New England, New York, and the South-Atlantic States. The awakening of the Orient means very much to all the nations of Christendom, commercially no less than politically; and it would be short-sighted statesmanship on our part to refuse to take the necessary steps for securing a proper share to our people of this commercial future (Roosevelt 1902).

As for opium use in the Philippines, U.S. leaders had initially accepted and made plans for this “very legitimate and lucrative subject of taxation.” In fact, the idea of drawing government revenue from opium was quite consistent with the colonial practices of the British, Spanish and Dutch. As such, a high tariff was enacted and in 1902 the ban on sales by Chinese citizens in the Philippines was lifted (Foster 2003, 97). “That policy was recommended and adopted without controversy” and with the agreement of then governor of the Philippines, William Howard Taft, in 1903 (Foster 2010, 12).

A few short years later, U.S. leaders were considering a very different approach, one based on the traditional notion of “civilizing” as a justification for colonization. This “civilizing mission” is exemplified in Rudyard Kipling’s famous poem, “The White Man’s Burden,” originally published in 1899 with the subtitle, “The United States and the Philippine Islands.”

Take up the White Man’s burden-
Send forth the best ye breed-
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need;
To wait in heavy harness,

2The Second Philippine Commission in 1900 as cited in Anne L. Foster, “Models for Governing; Opium and Colonial Policies in SE Asia 1898-1910,” in The American Colonial State in the Philippines: Global Perspectives, 2003, edited by Julian Go and Anne L. Foster (Duke University Press, 2003), 99. The authors of the report “did not find opium consumption a hindrance to the civilizing policy they believed the United States would pursue in the islands.”
On fluttered folk and wild-
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child (Kipling 1929).

Soon after the U.S. occupation of Manila in 1898, missionaries from the American Bible Society, the British and Foreign Bible Society, Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Baptist and numerous other congregations, began pouring into Philippines as they had been doing in China (Schoonover 2003, 105). These missionaries fervently opposed the use of opium and appealed to government leaders to end the import tax and outlaw it altogether. They were especially concerned about the increasing number of native Filipino users who had been specifically prohibited from smoking it under Spanish rule. A new Congressional proposal for an opium concession in 1903 galvanized the opposition of the missionaries. Under the powerful Evangelical Union, an umbrella organization for Protestant mission groups, they bombarded Washington with “letters, cables and preprinted cards” in an appeal not to “duplicate the disgraceful record of Great Britain in toying with this awful curse” (Foster 2010, 99).

Aware that the American public had been strongly critical of the British opium trade, Washington leaders quickly changed their tune. Secretary of War Elihu Root cabled the governor that U.S. policy should not “either in substance or appearance… promote such traffic” (Foster 2010, 99). The government also commissioned an investigatory Opium Committee to study different regulatory systems in Japan, Formosa, China, Hong Kong and elsewhere in the region. In 1906, the Committee reported to Congress and, depicting the horrors of opium usage, recommended that the U.S. adopt Formosa’s system of “progressive prohibition.” The report encouraged U.S. officials to push other colonial governments to prohibit opium and “present themselves as the regional leaders on opium policy” (Foster 2010, 109).

The Chinese government greatly welcomed the new prohibition of opium in the Philippines and responded with an edict of its own in 1906. As such, government would end domestic opium production and prohibit opium smoking in China within a ten-year period (Willoughby 1920, 469). Britain subsequently agreed to phase out its own exports of opium as well. The switch from taxing opium to prohibiting it, then, facilitated a decisive shift in the regional balance of power in favor of U.S. leadership. Over the next several years, Britain, France, Germany, Japan and other great powers gradually followed suit and a common resolution to restrict opium as well as morphine was passed at the Shanghai conference in 1909 (Waddell 1970, 312).

At the same time, overt support for restricting opium became a critical diplomatic tool for U.S. leaders. Where Secretary of War William Taft had previously likened the opium habit in China to that of alcohol in the U.S., in 1906 he joined with Bishop Charles Brent in affirming that the “the opium question in China was one of the most important in the improvement of Chinese and Oriental civilization” (Foster 2010, 14-15). As Foster points out, “the skillful deployment of the rhetoric of civilization” in Shanghai enabled U.S. representatives to gain widespread acceptance for the “gradual suppression” of opium. “Dutch and British officials had to arraign themselves on the side of civilization, of being a civilizing influence in the region” (Foster 2010, 17).

Obstacles to Drug Regulation in the U.S.

As opium became less defensible abroad, U.S. officials came under increasing pressure to enact restrictions at home. Opium use and addiction in the U.S. had been rising steadily in the latter half of the nineteenth century. A fair number of those addicted were Chinese immigrants in the U.S. who had brought the habit of smoking opium with them. The greater part of the problem, however, was “inadvertently” induced through the use of popular medications including cough syrups, painkillers, and digestive aids. “Physicians would prescribe opiates and many of the people who used them would become addicted” though opiates were not considered dangerous at the time. The largest group of

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white males who were using opiates was the physicians themselves. The most typical users, though, were white women, commonly middle class, who took patent medicines made of either opium or morphine in an alcohol base... it rarely interfered with their ability to function. Just as important, no social stigma was attached to such use (Rowe 2006, 10).

As Reasons observes, “until the turn of the century, the use of opium and its derivatives was generally less offensive to Anglo-America’s public morals than the smoking of cigarettes and the consumption of alcohol” (Reasons 1974, 385).

Still, there by early 1900s, there was a vigorous and growing anti-drug movement inside the U.S. whose leaders sought the passage of strict regulations at the national level. Among its most prominent leaders was Charles Brent, an Episcopal bishop who had served in the Philippines, and subsequently headed the “Brent Commission,” which had first recommended international control of narcotics in the early 1900s. Even more influential was Dr Hamilton Wright who oversaw preparations for the 1909 meeting in Shanghai, drafted the Harrison Anti-narcotic Act and was its most dedicated advocate.

There was a crucial obstacle the goal of drug restriction in the U.S., however: the essential nature of U.S. governing institutions. Musto relates how the federated nature of government in the U.S. had, in fact, been “a conscious attempt to prevent establishment of an all-powerful central government characteristic of Europe.” Under this system each state had been endowed with the power to regulate production in its own right. In addition, the democratizing movements of the 1830s had resulted in sharp limitations on professional licensing. “State after state repealed the medical licensing laws adopted in earlier days” and lawmakers generally left it to the public to decide which the best medical theories were. Even as medical licensing was revived in the 1880s, wide disparities among the states remained and made enforcement difficult. Under these conditions, the U.S. had … no practical control over the health professions, no representative national health organizations to aid the government in drafting regulations, and no controls on the labeling, composition, or advertising of compounds that might contain opiates or cocaine. The United States not only proclaimed a free marketplace, it practiced this philosophy with regard to narcotics in a manner unrestrained at every level of preparation and consumption (Musto 1987).

While controls over addictive drugs varied from state to state, little attempt had been made to control these at the national level.

As long as the drug problem was regarded as a domestic matter then, the aim of establishing a national-level policy to restrict drug usage would remain an uphill struggle. The movement found crucial allies, however, in those foreign policy leaders who were now under pressure to restrict drug usage at home so as to conform to their own rhetoric at the international conferences. Throughout the Congressional debates, proponents of the Harrison Bill, including Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan, “said little … about the evils of narcotic addiction” and instead brought up the need to fulfill the obligations of The Hague Convention, to which the U.S. was a signatory.

While Wright played on racial fears in order to counter the deeply rooted states’ rights position in the deep South, it was the need for international credibility that most often drove his appeal. “It is essential for diplomatic reasons that we should be able to appear in that conference … and at least be able to say that we have cleaned our own house,” he said. Most embarrassingly, the European countries had already adopted “drastic laws” making it impossible to purchase these drugs save with a doctor’s prescription. Even England, most excoriated of all, was then phasing out its exports to China (U.S. Congress 1906, 94).

Shortly after the Congressional hearings in 1911 and just prior to the meeting of the First international Opium Conference at The Hague, the New York Times featured an interview with Wright titled “Uncle Sam is the Worst Drug Fiend in the World.” In it, the notions of the “civilizing mission” and racial superiority loomed large. By reducing the opium “vice” in the Philippines, Wright stated, the government had been able to “encourage thrift and doubtless raised the general intelligence.” Subsequently, he and other American leaders had thus been able to attend the Shanghai conference as “a
righteous crowd licensed to feel superior.” About China, he stated, “You see, we had suggested the whole thing, primarily with the idea of guarding the weak morals of the Chinaman against his will, perhaps, and at the expense of his own pocket…” (Marshall 1911).

At the same time, as Wright put it, opium had “gained a terrifying foothold which it has been advancing with appalling speed until it threatens to become a drug-invasion great enough to hamper our triumphant march of progress…” The dreadful habits abetted by greedy or ignorant physicians, druggists and manufacturers, he went on, “must certainly be checked, if we wish to maintain our high place among the nations of the world and any elevated standard of intelligence and morality among ourselves…. (this) could not but debauch the community…” (Marshall 1911).

The achieving of that “high place among nations” was certainly consistent with the foreign policy goals of the White House. As such, the domestic aims of the movement for drug restriction came neatly together with those of foreign policy and a discourse serving both aims emerged. The nature of this shift is explored in the next section.

The Changing Discourse
Prior to 1911, most news stories about opium were moderate in tone and implied that opium use could become a problem anywhere. In that year, a distinct change took place in the way opium and other drugs were portrayed. Stories were more likely to imply that the origins of the habit lay outside American culture and link opium not to China but to Chinese culture. This approach would continue through the early 1920s, nearly disappear for the next four decades, and resurface in the 1960s with little modification.

To look more closely at this pattern, I examined the top three hits for each year between 1903 and 1915 using just the key word “opium” in the America’s Historical Newspapers database. I eliminated those that were simple news summaries, crime stories and fictional pieces (of which there was just one). This left exposés and investigative pieces, in which there was an identifiable perspective. These articles are accompanied in the chart by their rank in the listings that came up for “opium.” I then developed a range of characteristics in the orientation of the articles and labeled the two endpoints “General” and “External.” The range contains five positions as follows:

**Explanation of Positions 1-5**

1. Describing Opium: These articles feature opium’s preparation and various uses without attaching it to a culture.

   Examples:
   - “Numerous distressing maladies, it is contended, can be more successfully treated by pyrolitic inhalation (of opium) than by any method previously known.” (Opium as Medicine, 7/23/1905)
   - “The natives wade about in the large vats containing the paste-like drug and handing it out to hundreds of ball makers sitting around the room.” (Preparing Raw Opium, 9/26/1905)
   - “(I)t is a question whether the opium evil is anything like so great as is generally supposed… I doubt whether the opium habit is as prevalent among the Chinese as the whiskey and beer drinking habit is among the English, Germans or Americans.” (China’s Anti-Opium Crusade, 11-14-1909)

2. Describing the Opium Trade: These articles explain the nature of the international trade in opium and at times are critical of Britain’s role in promoting it.

   Examples:
   - “While the Western nations eat it, or drink it, the Orientals smoke it. England made many millions of money supplying opium from India to the Chinese, who must have it even if they starve for food.” (The Opium Monopoly in the Philippines, 6-12-1903)
   - “He didn’t notice the queer look and the queer smell of the stuff until he had daubed up some of the brass, and then he let out a snort and began to cuss the quality of the paste the navy was dishing out…” (American Tar’s Deal in Opium, 2-7-1904)
“England, if statistics prove anything, is now reaping the harvest of this commercial principle of extending the market, and its own people are becoming addicted to the vice.” (Opium in America, 7-10-1905)

3. Opium Use as a Problem: These articles see opium use as a problem without making it endemic to a race or foreign country.
Examples:
- “The terrible nature of the opium vice, whether it is used as the Chinese use it or in the form of morphine or laudanum cannot be exaggerated.” (The Opium Habit, 9-18-1903)
- “The vast majority of mankind will long be of the undivided opinion that opium is the most all-crushing curse that afflicts man.” (Extent of Opium Industry, 3-13-1904)
- “China has begun to realize that her future rests largely upon her ability to rescue her teeming millions form the blight of the opium habit.” (China Laboring Under Curse of Opium Traffic, 8-6-1911)

4. Externalizing Opium: These articles suggest that illicit opium use in the U.S. is endemic to an ethnic group or foreign country (usually China).
Examples:
- “The practice (of opium smoking) is common in the local China town and among the Orientals it is impossible to prevent it.” (How to Smoke Opium – But You Had Better Not Try, 11-02-1907)
- “Bret Harte’s lines about the ‘ways that are dark and the tricks that are vain,’ still apply to a great many Chinese officials. Much pressure will have to be exercised yet, before the Orientals shake themselves free of opium” (The Vampire Opium Still at China’s Throat, 2-6-1910).
- “It is an axiom that an Oriental will not do without some narcotic.” (Opium suppression Hits Farmers Hard, 8-2-1914)

5. The U.S. as a Civilizing Force Regarding Opium: These articles support an active role for the U.S. in eliminating opium usage and often equate this role with the capacity to “civilize.”
Examples:
- “When these long drugged people awake they will throw off the fetters that have bound them so long. The civilized world has long made merry at the expense of those whose brains have been clouded by the fumes of the opium pipe, but the time seems not far distant when China will become as wide awake and alert as the Occidental nations.” (Opium [Illegible] in Cleveland, 5-5-1907)
- “The inauguration of a worldwide movement of the abolition of the trade in narcotic drugs is significant of an awakened public conscience in the nations of the west. Like the movement to abolish slavery, it marks a step upward, and, like that movement, it can only be brought to a successful issue at enormous economic cost.” (Putting Down Opium, 1-7-1912)
- “We, as Americans must feel an especial pride and interest in this breaking of the grip of the deadliest drug habit because it has been brought about largely through the efforts of the U.S…. At first the movement simply had as its object the banishment of opium from China but gradually the scope of the anti-opium ‘missionary work’ expanded until it embraced the whole world – every section of the globe where the use of opium has become a habit – and finally within the past few months the fight against the evil has been expanded in scope until it embraces prohibitive or restrictive action not only against opium, but also against morphine, cocaine, and, in short, all habit-forming drugs.” (The Fight Against the Opium Evil, 1-6-1912)

Findings
As the chart indicates, a shift in the tone of the articles occurs between 1903 and 1915. From 1903 to 1905, the articles are most often ranked as 2’s and 3’s with a small number of 1’s, reflecting a more generalizing approach wherein the use and sales of opium can potentially occur anywhere. One ex-
ample of the more casual regard for opium that comes of this approach is seen in a 1904 article, a light hearted telling of a sailor’s accidental use of smuggled opium as a brass polish: “He didn’t notice the queer look and the queer smell of the stuff until he had daubed up some of the brass …”

In 1907, we see three 4’s and a 5, reflecting the growing association of opium with “foreign” nationalities and the call for a U.S. “civilizing” role. These higher scores come soon after Roosevelt’s endorsement of the International Opium Commission and the Food and Drug Act in 1906. Another rise in scores occurs between 1909 and 1913, the two years when international conferences are taking place.

After 1913, a sense of mystery and adventure emerges in some of the articles. Several feature a “war” on drugs with identified foreign countries as the scene of drug ring formation and American police officers as unblemished heroes. A three-part real-life crime series in 1915 provides a good example of this. In Part 1, “authored by federal authorities,” we see “war” as the strategy: “Never in the history of the city (NYC) have so frequent arrests and convictions occurred in the war waged against drugs by Commissioner Woods through his most efficient lieutenants…” As the story is told, “Englishmen, Americans, Japanese and Chinese figure in the plot, and women played important roles in disposing of the contraband drugs….” The DA’s team raids a “building of five floors” that “housed many Chinese and their white wives.” Once apprehended, a disdainful culprit insists on being taken to jail in a cab, “grandiloquently saying, ‘If the United States can’t afford to pay for the cab I will.’” (Smashing the Opium Ring 1915a) In the end, it is the Chinese, Japanese and English who are apprehended, while Austria and Germany (both looming enemies abroad), are identified as source countries for opium and cocaine (Parkhurst 1915b).

It was not actually a U.S. president who first used the expression, “drug war.” President Taft urged Congress to enact restrictions against “opium and other are menacing drugs” and the “international aspect of these evils” on December 5, 1911 but made no mention of a “drug war.” Just a few days later, the Oregonian Portland, used the expression in the title, “Drug War International,” covering the opium conference at The Hague. This may have been the first public use of the expression.

Less than six months later, the Philadelphia Enquirer ran an article titled “Taft Urges War on Drugs.” In it, Secretary of State Knox warns that, “the American government may be justly accused of being half-hearted in its effort to mitigate or suppress the opium and allied evils,” if restrictive legislation were not soon passed. The same title appeared again in October 1912, in the Grand Forks Daily Herald. The piece covered the National Education Association’s concern over the use of “snuff, soft drinks and other drugs” by schoolchildren and urging “the waging of fierce war on cigarettes and the drug habit among children of school age.” Another reference appeared in the Boston Herald, in July 2013 as the title of a report on the drug conference at The Hague. No one in these articles is actually quoted as using the expression leading us to conclude that it was coined by news editors themselves much as a news editor had coined the expression “manifest destiny” in a previous era.

Referring to it for the first time as the war, the title, “The War on Drugs” appeared first in a July 1913 issue of the Boston Journal. In this opinion piece, the Hague convention was explicitly portrayed as a moral crusade: “It is evidence of the rising moral sense of the world that an international congress is now in session at The Hague, endeavoring to secure world-wide action for the suppression of the trade in habit-forming drugs …” (emphasis added), that the U.S. is the leader of this crusade is a point of pride: “It is also a matter of satisfaction to us that this movement is of American origin.” Although it was not used as a keyword in the search, the word “China” is mentioned in all articles up through article #3 in 1913. In that year, the first reference to “Mexico” appears. Afterward, the role of China is either absent or played down in favor of other countries. In 1915, the real-life crime drama

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4Prior to this the term “drug war” was used frequently to refer to competition among drug companies and the supposed lower prices that emerged. Some questioned whether this was really the case and argued for the people’s right to competitive prices in opinion pieces such as, “Drug Combine vs. the People.”
mode appears in which foreign countries are critical targets of law enforcement efforts to suppress opium (see Smashing the Opium Ring, Parts 1 and 2).

In 1914, the expression “war on drugs” is used twice, again in the title but not the text of the articles, both opinion pieces. In one a coroner calls on Congress to federalize the collection of data on the use of habit-forming drugs, which “menaces the American people” and to charge a federal officer with investigation of cases in which the use of a drug is suspected. The problem, said the coroner, was “too large for the states.” (Asks Federal Aid 1914) The other article describes a series of arrests for the use of opium along with a call to strengthen anti-drug laws. The expression appears twenty more times between 1915 and 1930, appearing for the first time in the text of an article in the Kansas City Star in 1915. This article covers new penalties termed “the first fire in the government’s war on the drug habit” and the appointment of a new official who calls it “the greatest menace to the American Nation.” The piece adopts an alarmist tone: “In the United States it is estimated unofficially that nearly four millions are slaves to drugs, ready to steal or lie or even kill to get a ‘shot’” (US Starts War on Drugs 1915).

The expression does not turn up between 1916 and 1918 but resurfaces in 1919. In that year, a one-sentence article announces the intention of the federal department of health to wage a “vigorous campaign” against drug use in Mexico, “alleged by several newspapers to be widespread.” (War on Drugs 1919) In 1920, we see Canada portrayed as a “vigorous” ally in the “war” against “illicit trading in opium and its derivatives, cocaine, morphine, heroin, etc., which form the basis of the drug habit on this continent.” In 1922, we find an announcement of India’s intent to suppress both alcohol and drugs as a step toward independence. Also that year, there is a report of European complaints that the U.S., as the largest per capita consumer of opium, has done little to suppress consumption at home (Government War on Drugs 1919).

A final article for this era appears in 1924 spelling out the danger from foreign countries in a terrifying manner:

“The United States is assailed by opium from Asia as a base, by cocaine with South America as a base and by heroin and synthetic drugs with Europe as a base. This deadly drug warfare that is striking from three sides at our citizens and homes is more destructive and biologically more dangerous to our future than would be united warfare against us from these three continents. Without knowledge of this peril organized exploitation gains easy victims, especially from young people. To the task of carrying out an adequate educational program all men and women who love their country and humanity should rally” (Our Dangerous 1924).

All of the post-World War II themes are here: the drug habit as a foreign invasion and the equivalent of war, the drug habit as a personal attack on homes and families, the habit as particularly dangerous to young people, and finally, engaging in anti-drug education as the hallmark of what it means to be an American.

After 1924 the expression appears only once each in 1932, 1935, 1959, and 1962, twice in 1967, and four times each in 1968 and 1969. After describing law enforcement at the state and local level through these years, the expression goes national in 1969, with Nixon’s announcement of a sweeping new national initiative calling drug abuse a “dangerous national threat.”

A new urgency and concerted national policy are needed at the federal level to begin to cope with this growing menace to the general welfare of the United States (Nixon Urges 1969).

We might notice here how the idea of drugs as a “menace” echoes Taft’s speech to Congress in 1911 in which he refers to “opium and other menacing drugs” along with the “international aspect of these evils.” We might also recall how, in 1914, they were referred to as “menaces to the American people,” and, in 1915, the “greatest menace to the American Nation.”

From this examination, news coverage of opium between 1903 and 1914 shifted from a general orientation where opium could be a problem anywhere to a narrower one where opium became a foreign and invasive force. Along the way, news editors labeled official calls for drug restriction a drug war. This coincided both with President Taft’s reference to the “international aspect of these evils” when
referring to opium and other drugs and anti-drug activist Hamilton Wright reference to a drug “invasion” in his interview with NYT in 1911.

Thus the groundwork was laid for a fundamental change in the way the drug problem would be seen for generations to come. While the expressions, drug war and war on drugs, nearly disappeared during the Great Depression and World War II, they resurfaced in the late 1960s with their essential meaning intact. This meaning has continued to define the U.S. particularly within the international context. The concept of a drug war turned U.S. adversaries into source countries with Germany and Austria playing this role in 1915 and Mexico in 1969. Likewise the heroes have been the manly and untainted U.S. law enforcement officers. The ultimate hero, of course, has been the U.S. government, which has derived authority throughout the world from its moralistic positioning on drugs.

Conclusion

By embedding the policy making process in the larger context of the international system then, we are able to understand the unique shaping of U.S. anti-drug policy. As a new colonial power in the Philippines, the U.S. followed England and other great powers in using the “civilizing mission” as a rationale for colonization. In the case of the Philippines, to “civilize” would come to mean protecting indigenous inhabitants from the opium habit. The civilizing mission would also become a powerful tool in international affairs for U.S. leaders. By associating the U.S. with the anti-opium message, they were able to form a closer relationship with China that facilitated trade advantages and increased U.S. influence in the world.

At home, however, the U.S. lagged behind other countries in actually regulating drug usage. The contradiction between U.S. rhetoric abroad and the near absence of regulatory legislation at the domestic level became a tremendous embarrassment for leaders. The notion of states’ rights and other characteristics of U.S. governing institutions posed a major obstacle to the kind of national-level legislation that prevailed in Western Europe. In order to generate broad public support for a federal law, leaders had to frame opium usage as an attack on the American way of life and sound the alarm as though it were an actual invasion. The resulting “war on drugs” thereby legitimized U.S. involvement in other countries and continues to do so today. This aspect of U.S. drug policy separates it from its counterparts in other Western industrialized countries where a public health orientation is more typical.

Finally, we come to the issue of ending the war on drugs. In framing the drug war as attack on American values, its proponents have drawn heavily from the puritan ethic of hard work and personal restraint. These traits, having fueled productivity and ingenuity, have been a point of pride for Americans throughout our history. In order to drum up support for the drug war, however, the proponents exaggerated this ethic to absurd proportions. The result has been a caricature – a righteous, obedient, impeccably groomed individual who stands for order and never fails to “just say no.”

All the same, in a country as large, diverse and continually changing as the U.S., the drug war has in fact brought about a certain level of unity. A great many parents, educators, law enforcement officials and others take it seriously and attempt to live accordingly. For this reason, when critics speak casually of “ending the drug war” they often encounter strong emotional reactions. The close connection between American identity and the avoidance of drugs makes it unlikely that we will adopt a European-style drug policy any time soon. Before there can be any real policy reform, we will have to begin by softening the underlying stereotype of Puritanism.

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General v. External Views of Opium: Rankings for Top Three Hits from American Historical Newspapers Index by Year, 1903-1914

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