

Bibliographical Essay

Historical Controversies: History of the War on Drugs

by Chris Calton

Throughout the course of my series on the History of the War on Drugs, I received several requests for a bibliography. Due to the informal format of the podcast, I did not deem it necessary to meticulously list each reference as one would in a scholarly publication, so any bibliography will be necessarily incomplete. In particular, in some episodes I referenced original source material such as archived newspaper articles and government documents that have been released under the Freedom of Information Act. I believe that I cited all such sources in the specific episodes I used them for, and they can be found online, but I will not be listing them here.

For people who do wish to do further reading, I have put together an incomplete bibliographical essay encompassing the majority of the books I used when making my show notes. I hope it is helpful.

Marijuana History

There are numerous books on the subject of marijuana and its history. By far the best is Martin Booth's *Cannabis: A History* (New York: Picador, 2003). Another great reference is Martin Lee's *Smoke Signals: A Social History of Marijuana – Medical, Recreational, and Scientific* (New York: Scribner, 2012). Martin Booth's history is more global and broader in category, whereas Lee's history is more US-centered and, as the subtitle suggests, a social history. There are some historical inaccuracies in Lee's book – mistakes that are common in such histories and shouldn't detract from the usefulness of the work as a whole, particularly as a resource regarding the various scientific studies and medical history of marijuana, which Lee offers in great detail. But wariness of some of the historical claims is warranted.

Michael Pollen's *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World* also has a useful chapter on cannabis for people who want a brief history of the drug, though Martin Booth's history better handles some of the questionable claims of the more ancient history. The Columbia University study *Ganja In Jamaica: The Effects of Marijuana Use* (New York: Anchor Books, 1976), in addition to simply being a useful medical and anthropological study of marijuana use in Jamaica, offers a very useful introduction to the botany and history of cannabis.

Opium History

Again, Martin Booth has produced the best overall history of opium in *Opium: A History* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1996). It is written in largely the same manner as his *Cannabis: A History*. The only other major opium-centered book on opium I've found is Alfred McCoy's *The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2003). This was originally published under the title *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia*, but the title was amended in the revised addition to reflect McCoy's research in the Middle East and Central and South America. In addition to offering the most thorough coverage of the CIA's involvement in heroin smuggling, its introduction is an incredibly efficient overview of heroin's history.

Cocaine History

I have not found a history of cocaine that I find anywhere nearly as satisfactory as Martin Booth's histories of cannabis and opium, but there are several histories out there, not all of which I've read. Tom Feiling's *Cocaine Nation: How the White Trade Took Over the World* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2009) is a useful history, but it's far too brief in the early years, and I find Feiling to be a subpar writer and the book to be poorly organized. The information inside it is good, but I did not come away feeling like I had a good handle on the history from this book alone.

For the early history of cocaine, historian Joseph Spillane is probably the best scholar. For the podcast, I found his *Cocaine: From Medical Marvel to Modern Menace in the United States, 1884-1920* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000) to be an incredibly useful resource. Another useful reference in the early episodes, and one of the best histories of the Drug War prior to Nixon, is Suzanna Reiss's *We Sell Drugs: The Alchemy of US Empire* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014). Although this is not a specifically cocaine-centered book, the cocaine history – particularly regarding Coca-Cola and Harry Anslinger's stockpile of painkillers – is the most useful aspect of the book. Although this is a fantastic work of historical scholarship, Reiss comes across as an extreme cultural relativist, so I recommend this book for the history, but not the actual arguments she is making throughout the book.

There are books that I did not use as source material for the podcast that are worth mentioning. One is Tim Madge's *White Mischief: A Cultural History of Cocaine* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2001). For the South American history of cocaine, which I talked very little about in the podcast but is still very important, anything by Paul Gootenberg is fantastic, particularly *Andean Cocaine: The Making of a Global Drug* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

For the CIA complicity in cocaine smuggling, Gary Webb's infamous *Dark Alliance: The Cia, The Contras, and the Crack Cocaine Explosion* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1998) remains the best resource. It's well written, exhaustively researched, and offers an incredibly thorough and detailed overview of the government's complicity in the cocaine boom of the 1980's. It is worth mentioning that this is the source of many of the false conspiracy theories regarding cocaine, but those falsities are not the fault of Webb, but rather people who have misinterpreted and distorted his claims, especially due to the media smear campaign waged against him prior to his death.

Although I do not talk about the South American drug trade much in this series (though I hope to come back to that in the future) there are two books that I referenced on that topic. The first is Mark Bowden's *Killing Pablo: The Hunt for the World's Greatest Outlaw* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001). This is apparently the basis for the Netflix show *Narcos* (which I have not watched and cannot comment on), and it is simply a fun read with good information about Pablo Escobar's rise and fall. However, it will only offer limited information about the Calí and Medellín cartels as a whole. The other book I referenced for a single introductory anecdote is Ted Galen Carpenter's *Bad Neighbor Policy: Washington's Futile War on Drugs in Latin America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), which is a libertarian critique of the Latin

American War on Drugs. Most of its history involves episodes that take place after I ended the series, but it's a wonderful book, and I would have referenced it more heavily if I continued the Drug War series into the present.

LSD History

The general history of LSD in the United States can be found in Martin Lee and Bruce Shlain's *Acid Dreams: The Complete Social History of LSD: The CIA, The Sixties, and Beyond* (New York: Grove Press, 1985). I also found useful Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair's *White Out: The CIA, Drugs and the Press* (New York: Verso, 1998). This is not as strictly LSD-centered, as it has chapters on other episodes of government absurdities (importing Nazi doctors, radiation experiments, etc.), and it also has chapters regarding the complicity of the government with cocaine and opium that apply to previous sections, but the LSD chapters were particularly helpful.

In the LSD episode of the show, I also mentioned H.P. Albarelli, Jr's *A Terrible Mistake: The Murder of Frank Olson and the CIA's Secret Cold War Experiments* (Chicago: Trine Day, 2009). This work focuses on the investigation surrounding the death of Frank Olson, but it gives an incredibly detailed overview of the CIA experiments with LSD.

General Drug War History

I find that there is actually a surprising lack of good works on the US political history of the War on Drugs. The best brief overview is Chapter 14 of Peter Andreas's *Smuggler Nation: How Illicit Trade Made America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). Most importantly, Andreas separates the history of alcohol prohibition (Chapter 13) and drug prohibition, which is important as people often conflate the two histories even though they were distinctly separate political movements.

The most tremendously useful book, which I believe is tragically out of print but can still be found used online relatively easily, is Dan Baum's *Smoke and Mirrors: The War on Drugs and the Politics of Failure* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1996). In the second half of the series, this was far and away the most useful resource, almost to the degree that I'm embarrassed as to how singularly I used this one source for so much of my content, but there is simply no other book that compares. Unfortunately, it does not cover the period prior to Nixon, and it ends in the early 1990's (which at the time of publication was current history). I followed many of the sources Baum cites, and found no errors or distortions. This is simply a fantastic piece of research.

Economics of Prohibition

Naturally, the starting point for the economics of drug prohibition is Mark Thornton's [*The Economics of Prohibition*](#), which can be read online for free thanks to the Mises Institute. Dr. Thornton's work was groundbreaking in that he identified what is now called "The Iron Law of Prohibition," demonstrating that prohibitions of intoxicating substances lead to increases in potency. Although Dr. Thornton's work is path-breaking, the most thorough single volume on the economics of the drug war is Bruce Benson and David Rasmussen's *The Economic Anatomy of a Drug War* (Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994). I

mention this as that best single volume because it devotes a chapter to Dr. Thornton's research, but it also adds relevant research regarding the criminal justice system and how it is affected by the War on Drugs. Additionally, Jeffrey Miron's *Drug War Crimes: The Consequences of Prohibition* (Oakland: Independent Institute, 2004) is a short and useful overview of the effects of drug prohibition on crime.

Additional Books

There are many more useful books that are worth reading that I may or may not have used in the podcast that I will mention only briefly.

Radley Balko's *The Rise of the Warrior Cop: The Militarization of America's Police Forces* (New York: Public Affairs, 2014) was a useful resource. It mimics the writing style of Dan Baum's *Smoke and Mirrors* and succeeds in offering a similarly wonderful bit of research that is not technically about the Drug War, but certainly belongs on any Drug War reading list.

Sam Quinones's *Dream Land: The True Tale of America's Opiate Epidemic* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2015) and Nick Reding's *Methland: The Death and Life of an American Small Town* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009) are both anecdotal histories, but they offer wonderful insight into the opioid and meth crises, respectively. Of the two, *Dreamland* is the most useful as an addition to the larger history of the problem.

For addiction science, Drs. Carl Hart, Bruce Alexander, and Gabor Maté have made several underappreciated contributions. The best overview of the latter two scientists can be found in two chapters of *Chasing the Scream: The First and Last Days of the War on Drugs* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2015). It might be worth mentioning that as a general critique of the War on Drugs, I think *Chasing the Scream* is far and away the best book I have yet come across, although I did not use it as reference for the podcast because it is limited in its historical contribution. Nonetheless, I cannot say enough good things about this book.

Carl Hart's *High Price* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2013) offers some decent insight into addiction, but it's also a semi-autobiographical work about Dr. Hart that I found to be largely unnecessary in the context of his addiction science. The useful aspects of the book make up only a fraction of the 300+ pages. Regardless, Dr. Hart is doing great work, and he also has several useful articles, interviews, and a forthcoming second book that hopefully will offer more insight into his research.

For Mexican and Latin American drug gang history, Ioan Grillo is the best resource for two books: *El Narco: Inside Mexico's Criminal Insurgency* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2011) and *Gangster Warlords: Drug Dollars, Killing Fields, and the New Politics of Latin America* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2016), which covers Brazil and Jamaica in addition to Mexico.

For more entertaining descriptions of the Mexican Drug War environment, Dan Winslow has two novels that are actually quite useful. *The Power of the Dog* (New York: Vintage Crime, 2005) and *The Cartel*

(New York: Vintage Crime, 2015). The stories are fictional, but the description of the drug gangs and the Mexican environment over the past decade is quite accurate.

There is a new work on Harry Anslinger I have yet to read, entitled *Assassin of Youth: A Kaleidoscopic History of Harry J. Anslinger's War on Drugs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016). I only mention it because a work of this nature is long overdue, and it is useful to be aware of.

This is far from a complete list of Drug War-related books, particularly as there has been an explosion of literature on the subject in recent years. However, this encompasses the majority of my resources for the Drug War series of *Historical Controversies* as well as some that I did not reference in the podcast but believe are worth mentioning anyway. For more from me on the matter, you can find several articles I have written on the Drug War on [Mises Wire](#), most of which cover issues I did not talk about in the podcast.