

# The Never Ending Drug War: The Personalities, Politics and Espionage Intrigues that Shaped the DEA

A Review of Dougals Valentine's book

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Global Research, April 22, 2010

22 April 2010

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

After 40 years, the War on Drugs is about to become the longest continuous war in US history. In *The Strength of the Pack*, Douglas Valentine explains why dismantling the \$44 billion a year DEA juggernaut is unlikely to happen as long as America attempts to maintain a world empire.

This never-ending war has been a phony contest, an arm wrestle between two arms of the US state: the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) and the Central intelligence Agency (CIA). Routinely, the DEA's attempts at prosecuting major traffickers in US courts were dismissed on national security grounds, because the traffickers were CIA assets. As CIA director George Bush explained in 1976, these cover-ups were legal under a 1954 agreement between the CIA and the Justice Department, which gave the CIA the right to block prosecutions and to keep its crimes secret in the name of national security. The "de-facto" immunity from prosecution enabled CIA assets to brazenly deal drugs, knowing they were 'protected'.

Valentine's research for *The Strength of The Pack* involved interviewing a score of former US narcotics agents who worked for the FBN (Federal Bureau of Narcotics), the BNDD (Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs) and the DEA (Drug Enforcement Agency), as "the narcs", the US government's drug enforcement police, have variously been known. Their stories reveal that America's drug law enforcement agents were pawns in a rigged game, a never-ending conflict that served to keep in place a gigantic black market, allowing faceless forces to exert political and financial pressure from the shadows.

In the process of penetrating the world drug trade, US narcotic agents invariably stumbled upon the CIA's involvement in drug-trafficking. One of the reasons the Federal Bureau of Narcotics was abolished in the 1960s was that its case-making agents uncovered these political and espionage intrigues. In the 1970s the DEA and the CIA warred over the role of South Vietnamese government officials in the heroin trade and DEA agents were taught the rules of "plausible deniability" to insulate US involvement. During the 1980s the DEA's priority was protecting the Reagan's administration's illegal drug operations in Central America and Central Asia. The DEA was suborned and became an adjunct of the CIA in American foreign policy, politely staying away from CIA sponsored war zones in Central Asia and Central America, operating the War on Drugs along ideological lines.

Today, says Valentine, the DEA is a top-heavy bureaucracy, ruled by ideologues unsullied by street work, strained though a sieve of security clearances, oblivious to their mandate and beholden only to political power brokers. As a consequence, the Northern Alliance can deal drugs with impunity while Taliban associates require investigating. In the never-ending war, the US empire and its assets always win.

Valentine traces the CIA's hi-jacking of federal drug law enforcement from the early 1950s when a handful of narcotics agents, at the behest of the CIA through its MKULTRA Program, set up safe houses in New York and San Francisco for illegal drug-testing experiments on US citizens. Equipped with two-way mirrors, the drug agents observed US congressmen and others, under the influence of LSD. Over the next decade, federal drug agents helped sprinkle so much acid in the Bay area that it spawned the psychedelic generation.

While the CIA developed the Golden Triangle, CIA moles in the Bureau of Narcotics routinely buried reports that implicated the CIA's proprietary airline, Air America, in heroin smuggling. Using the cloak of national security, Ted Shackley, the CIA's station chief in Laos, managed to keep the Laos operation flying beneath the radar. When narcotics agents reported that the CIA was using US army trucks to transport drugs, Shackley responded angrily telling them that if they did not stop monkeying around they would end up toppling the South Vietnamese government.

The South Vietnamese military ran the biggest drug trafficking network in South Vietnam; Air Force chief Ky, Prime Minister Khiem and Vice President Thieu were all involved in the racket through their wives. The CIA did not want to bust the generals or the hills tribesmen who were fighting the crucial flanking war that kept the communists from conquering Vietnam. Nor would they allow narcotics agents to pursue the corrupt Thai police, military and politicians who allowed the CIA to use Thailand as its base for its regional operations. To fight the war on communism, the war on drugs had to be subverted.

As the director of the Bangkok DEA office Fred Dick told Valentine "I will believe until my dying day that there was, and probably still is, an unholy alliance between the CIA, the Kuomintang and the Thai government. The agency is aiding and abetting the opium-smuggling traffic in the Golden Triangle, while at the same time the DEA is trying to combat it."

The CIA's covert involvement in drugs continued through Laos, Iran-Contra, the invasion of Panama, Columbia and Afghanistan. The Agency continually helped drug warlords in Vietnam and Nicaragua traffic in narcotics in the name of anti-communism, and it does the same today in Afghanistan in the name of anti-terrorism. For decades, the CIA and its assets sabotaged the War on Drugs in order to win wars in Asia and Central America, a fact corralled from the US public by the mainstream media, under an almost impenetrable "whiteout".

In the 1960s South Vietnamese President Diem and his opium addicted brother, Nhu, financed their secret police through the opium trade, but they were presented as models of Christian propriety by the US media. Their assassins inherited the state, the US media adoration and the opium trade. This historical precedent is a lesson that might concern the Karzai brothers today.

Drug running and gun running are, in Jonathon Kwitny's phrase, "The crimes of patriots". At a time when international attention is starting to focus on the opium war in Afghanistan, The

Strength of the Pack is a well researched investigation, in the spirit of The Politics of Heroin and Whiteout, into this secret world and the hidden agenda of the US national security state and its historic role in the world drug trade.

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