



ANNE L. FOSTER

# THE LONG WAR ON DRUGS

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ANNE L. FOSTER

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For all my History 313 students,  
for whom I wrote and who made it better

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I began writing this book to provide a text for students in my course Long War on Drugs. No single, accessible book existed, and I wrote first for them. I asked them for feedback, since I hoped to publish it someday. My first thank you, then, is to all my History 313 students, who provided encouragement, suggestions, and insightful criticism. In particular, I would like to thank Isiah Baxter, Kim Caufield, Sebastian Cummins, Andy Fouts, Jasen Kwok, Brandon Scott, Cassie Souder, Myles Taylor, and Faith Williams.

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When I wrote my first book, my children were small and paid attention only to the fact that writing kept me away from them. This time, they were teenagers and now are adults, and whether because the topic is more interesting or they are older, they paid more attention to what I was writing. Naomi had gone away to college before I began writing in earnest, but she listened patiently while I thought out loud about the book during her calls and offered helpful suggestions. Susan didn't complain (too much) when I spent several weeks of her junior year of high school in the Netherlands without her, and she has asked many questions about the history of drugs. Those questions made the class I teach, and this book, better. I couldn't do any of it without support from Jeff. My mom and dad, Bobbie, and Maria all helped in ways they do and don't know.

The pandemic prevented me from taking the research trips I had planned to find images for the book. But as you will see, I was more fortunate than I could have imagined with photographs. Steve Raymer, whose photographs tell stories all on their own, enthusiastically responded to my request for an image or two. He generously supplied many more than that. I am truly grateful.

The continued support and encouragement of Gisela Fosado, my editor at Duke University Press, has been instrumental in prompting me to finish the manuscript. I couldn't ask for a better editor. Thank you to Adriane Lentz-Smith for suggesting I talk with her. The two anonymous reviewers provided helpful feedback beyond what I have ever experienced. The whole Duke UP team, in particular Alejandra Mejía and Livia Tenzer, have been terrific to work with. They have helped me realize my vision for this book. I am sure that a book covering such a large and changing topic contains errors, for which responsibility remains with me.

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## INTRODUCTION. The Meaning of Drugs

The official death toll from overdose in the United States in 2020–21 totaled more than 100,000 people, more than doubling the overdose death numbers of only five years earlier. Drug overdoses, if counted as a separate category in US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) tallies, would have ranked as the sixth leading cause of death.<sup>1</sup> In 2020, approximately 9.5 million Americans reported misusing opioids.<sup>2</sup> The United States, despite having a policy prohibiting nonmedicinal use of narcotics for more than a century, has not solved the drug problem. By some measures, misuse of drugs has gotten worse in recent years. Despite this persistent problem, US policy to prevent drug use and abuse has remained remarkably consistent. The first prohibitionist federal law aimed at restricting recreational consumption of narcotics passed in 1914. Since then, federal drug policy has focused primarily on controlling supply of drugs and punishing users and dealers with prison time. Demand-reduction efforts, such as treatment and prevention, have received inadequate and intermittent funding. Since Barack Obama's presidency, there have been modest steps to provide more federal support for a health care approach to addiction, with the Joseph R. Biden administration even providing some funds for harm-reduction strategies such as needle exchange. These shifts remain modest and controversial. US drug policy remains focused primarily on arrests and seizures. Even though the phrase "War on Drugs" is usually associated with policies originating in Richard M. Nixon's presidency in the early 1970s, I argue that the United States has pursued a War on Drugs approach for more than one hundred years.

Critiques of the War on Drugs approach focus on its ineffectiveness, the militarization of efforts to control the drug supply coming from other countries, the differential policing and prison sentences of racial minorities,

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and the punishment of people who have had the misfortune to become addicted to drugs. Supporters of the War on Drugs emphasize that these illegal drugs are harmful, and it is the job of government to punish illegal behavior. They hope that this punishment will serve both to repress illegal activity and to serve as a warning to those tempted to get involved with drugs. The problem is a vexing one, and many people are urging that the government rethink the War on Drugs approach. Some of them want to remove all restrictions on this war, devoting more resources to the current efforts and imposing long prison sentences on all involved with the trade. Others find harm reduction, in which users are supported in safer methods of drug consumption to reduce the likelihood of disease and overdose, more humane. Still others urge legalization of some or even all illegal drugs, arguing that humans naturally seek altered states and that many drugs can be used safely, even enjoyably. It is better, in their minds, to tax the sale of these drugs and gain revenue than to spend revenue to control what will not be controlled. This book can help inform these policy discussions by examining how and why earlier policies have been adopted as well as their shortcomings and successes.

The aim of the book is to explore how people have consumed drugs, when legal and illegal, since the early twentieth century, as well as explain why a prohibitionist approach was adopted. It then explores the implications of that prohibitionist approach for medical, social, legal, cultural, and international politics. The book focuses primarily on narcotics, which in the early years was used as an umbrella term to include both opiates and cocaine. It argues that the basic patterns of drug control were set during the years when US actors were most concerned with opiates. The policies adopted to control cocaine, marijuana, and, after World War II, the increased illicit use of pharmaceuticals as well as synthetic drugs such as LSD still relied on the basic methods adopted in the early twentieth century.

Narcotics prohibition developed in a global context, so while the story in many ways centers on the United States, the book draws connections to events around the world in order to better illuminate how policies were made and the consequences of them. US politicians and activists often led the prohibitionist movement, but implementation of drug restrictions required cooperation from actors in other countries. Sometimes these actors shared US goals; other times they had competing needs. US supply-side-control efforts were frequently enforced at the US border or even in a producing country, meaning US policy reverberated, often with devastating effects,

around the world. The earliest US attempts to implement restrictions, in the US colony in the Philippines after 1905, were hindered by the differing policies of surrounding countries. Since that date, US policy has depended on enticing or forcing other countries to cooperate.

One goal of this book is for readers to reexamine their own assumptions about not only how and why people take drugs but the kinds of policies that would best control drug use to those that are perhaps beneficial, or at the least less harmful. The problem is a complex one, and the more people who think deeply about it, the better. This book is a work of history, not of policy. It demonstrates that some policies have not worked or have had counterproductive consequences. It draws attention to the choices we have made and the implications of those choices, helpful and harmful. Perhaps most importantly, it encourages readers to think about drugs differently. For as long as there has been recorded history, people have been seeking ways to alter their state of mind. Some drugs and some ways of using them are dangerous; others can be healing or simply enjoyable. This book aims to help readers understand ways they can contribute to reducing dangers to themselves, their family and friends, global politics, and even the broader environment.

The book is organized into thirteen short chapters. The first chapter provides a historical background on the uses of drugs in history. Chapters 2 through 5 comprise part I of the book, loosely covering 1870 to 1940. At the beginning of this period, opium, cocaine, and marijuana were lightly regulated, if at all, and consumed commonly for both medicinal and recreational purposes, especially in Europe, the United States, Central and South America (coca and marijuana), and many parts of Asia (primarily opium but also marijuana in some places). By its end, many countries had instituted some controls over use. These controls varied widely, from requiring prescriptions or registering users to complete prohibition of recreational use. Part II, which covers 1940 to 1980 in chapters 6 through 9, focuses on the implementation of a global prohibition of nonmedicinal drug use. These chapters explore the ways that happened as well as the consequences of that prohibition for both the people who continued to use and the governments attempting to stop that use. Part III, chapters 10 through 13, covers 1980 to the present. This part of the book focuses on continuities in the War on Drugs approach but also some changes, as with marijuana policy in the United States, and new challenges, such as environmental consequences and the increased production of synthetic drugs. A short

conclusion returns to the ways the drug issue plays out in the United States and the Philippines, but in recent years rather than more than a century ago, to remind us of continuities in the US approach and the harms stemming from it.

### **A Note on Sources**

I wrote this book to serve as the backbone text for a class I teach with the same title as the book. For that reason, the source base tilts to a reliance on synthesizing the many excellent works by other historians and scholars about drug history. In part I, which is closest to my own research, I draw on both primary and secondary sources equally and often contribute directly to creating new scholarly arguments about this history. In parts II and III, primary sources serve as examples and to extend arguments already made by scholars. In general, parts II and III rely on research done by others. The chapter endnotes cite works I quote directly, of course, and acknowledge specific contributions or pieces of information. Each chapter has a list of suggestions for further reading, found at the end of the book. There, I include the most important works I relied on in writing each chapter as well as articles and books that readers can use to learn more about the topics of each chapter.

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## NOTES

### INTRODUCTION. **The Meaning of Drugs**

1. The CDC counts overdoses in the “accidents” category when enumerating deaths. See CDC, National Center for Health Statistics, “Drug Overdose Deaths in the U.S. Top 100,000 Annually,” press release, November 17, 2021, [https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/nchs\\_press\\_releases/2021/20211117.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/nchs_press_releases/2021/20211117.htm).

2. US Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, “Highlights for 2020 National Survey on Drug Use and Health,” accessed May 23, 2022, <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/release/2020-national-survey-drug-use-and-health-nsduh-releases>.

### CHAPTER 1. **The Many Uses of Drugs**

1. Neil C. M. Carrier, *Kenyan Khat: The Social Life of a Stimulant* (Boston: Brill, 2007), esp. chapter 1. This work is an anthropological, not historical, approach. One of the few historical studies of khat is Ezekiel Gebissa, *Leaf of Allah: Khat and Agricultural Transformation in Harerge, Ethiopia, 1875–1991* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004). For peyote, see Mike Jay, *Mescaline: A Global History of the First Psychedelic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), especially chapters 1 and 2.

2. For a useful overview, see Roderick Phillips, *Alcohol: A History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

3. Benjamin Breen, *The Age of Intoxication: Origins of the Global Drug Trade* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 157–58. Breen also provides an excellent introduction to the history of drugs in the early modern era.

4. For a useful introduction to the history of tobacco, see Marcy Norton, *Sacred Gifts, Profane Pleasures: A History of Tobacco and Chocolate in the Atlantic World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

5. Sidney W. Mintz’s classic *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Penguin, 1986) remains the best starting point for this topic.

6. Martin Booth’s *Opium: A History* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1996) is useful for the modern period.

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