

Drug Wars, Drug Violence, and Drug Addiction in the Americas

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Russell Crandall. *Drugs and Thugs: The History and Future of America's War on Drugs*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020, 520 pp., \$44 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-300-24034-4.

Benjamin T. Smith. *The Dope: The Real History of the Mexican Drug Trade*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2021, 480 pp., \$30 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-1-324-00655-8.

Sam Quinones. *The Least of Us: True Tales of America and Hope in the Time of Fentanyl and Meth*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021, 432 pp., \$28 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-1-63557-435-7.

“I think if you were Satan and you were settin around tryin to think up somethin that would just bring the human race to its knees what you would probably come up with is narcotics,” observes Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, the protagonist of Cormac McCarthy’s *No Country for Old Men*.¹ Russell Crandall begins *Drugs and Thugs* with the epigram, then builds a case that militarized counternarcotics policing—making war on drugs—is as bad as the plague of illicit narcotics itself. A professor of Latin American Studies who has served as a national security advisor in Republican and Democratic administrations and as an aid worker and teacher in Colombia and

Ecuador, Crandall is well placed to assess the costs of the drug war in Central America and the northern Andean states.

Benjamin T. Smith takes as his subject “the real history,” meaning the political economy, of the Mexican drug trade. A professor of Latin American history who specializes in Mexico, Smith has testified as an expert witness for asylum seekers fleeing gang violence. He knows the archives and he knows the streets. *The Dope* shows how, over the course of a century and thanks in no small measure to US drug-war escalation, Mexican narcotic trafficking became catastrophically violent and spawned parallel forms of extortion and racketeering.

The investigative reporter Sam Quinones also thinks that Mexican narcotic trafficking has been catastrophic, though *The Least of Us* (and its influential predecessor, *Dreamland*, published in 2015) deal mainly with the traffic’s effects in the United States over the last several decades. I will return to Quinones’s findings and recommendations, which in many ways run contrary to those of Crandall and Smith. It will be simplest, however, to begin with the long and increasingly violent history of counternarcotics policing that *Drugs and Thugs* and *The Dope* describe.

Crandall and Smith commence their stories in the early twentieth century, when reformers, modernizing states, and diplomats began framing narcotic-control laws and treaties. They sought to restrict narcotic use to legitimate medical and scientific purposes, minimizing poisoning and addiction. Problems quickly arose. What counted as legitimate use? How could making, selling, and using narcotics be kept to licensed manufacturers, wholesalers, retailers, physicians, pharmacists, and patients possessing bona fide prescriptions?

Legislators, regulators, and judges found answers as they pieced together what we now call closed systems of narcotic control. The problem that they never resolved, however, was what to do about black- and gray-market demand. Because much of that demand emanated from nonmedical users, often lower-class men in or on the fringes of the underworld, there was a built-in political temptation to come down especially hard on the likes of opium smokers, cocaine sniffers, heroin injectors, and marijuana smokers. Geography also shaped policy. By the early twentieth century two large countries had unusually high rates of narcotic addiction. They were China in the eastern hemisphere and the United States in the western.

The last fact is crucial for Smith, who argues that the Mexican drug trade was largely driven by the US demand for narcotics. That demand originally centered on opiates. As time passed it expanded to a variety of illicit drugs, including high-quality marijuana and cocaine prized by baby boomers. Whatever the drug *du jour*, opportunistic Mexicans ramped up supply. Their enterprise was illegal but populist, providing dollars for an impoverished economy. High US demand and low Mexican wages created “enormous incentives to produce and traffic drugs” (7).

The most obvious drawback, the potential for more Mexican drug abuse and drug-related crime, was at first a minor concern. Outside the Chinese community, Mexican opiate use was rare. Marijuana smoking was not, though it was stigmatized and subject to laws more punitive than those of the United States. As for *gringos*, who cared about narcotics shipped north of the border? What mattered was dollars flowing south of it.

From the inception of Mexico’s illicit drug trade, in the 1910s, many Mexican politicians sought to harness income from it. They skimmed money through what Smith and his theoretical

lodestar, the historian Charles Tilly, term protection rackets. Police and politicians ignored or assisted favored traffickers (assistance that extended to scaring away or eliminating their rivals) and collected what amounted to a drug-trade tax. They kept some of the money for themselves and put some into building schools and other public projects.

There was a catch. Because the tax was so lucrative, it attracted rival collectors. At first these were mostly local and state officials. They were followed by federal politicians, police, and military officers. Then came the cartels, loose, shifting criminal federations that sought to control narcotic protection and smuggling routes. Despite their name (a piece of drug-war propaganda that happened to stick), cartels had nothing to do with limiting supply and fixing prices. To the contrary, prices fell as narcotic availability, purity, and potency increased. What the cartels sought was armed power, a pursuit expedited by the expiration, in 2004, of the US ban on civilian sales of semiautomatic assault weapons.

Smith highlights the irony. Mexico had some of the world's strictest gun laws, but the six thousand US gun stores within an hour's drive of the border supplied an abundance of military-class weaponry. Gun homicides, fifteen percent of all Mexican murders in 1997, rose to two-thirds by 2017 (382). Meanwhile heavily armed cartels succeeded in a form of state capture. Not all of the state, Smith notes carefully. But they seized the lucrative part that had, for most of the twentieth century, managed and profited from the protection rackets.

Beginning in the early 1940s, US law-enforcement officials and politicians tried to slow the flow of Mexican narcotics. They resorted to diplomatic and economic blackmail, such as the border-snarling Operation Intercept of 1970, and they provided aid and equipment for intensified Mexican counternarcotics policing. Apart from transient supply disruptions, the surges were

ineffectual. “Drugs always found a way,” Smith writes—a grim homage to what Dr. Ian Malcolm (Jeff Blum) says about life in *Jurassic Park*.

Crandall recounts similar failures for US-backed campaigns in Colombia, Central America, and other drug-war proving grounds. All yielded occasional tactical wins. None produced enduring strategic victory. At the height of the Reagan-Bush drug war, from 1981 to 1991, US heroin prices fell by a third. From 1986 to 1991, after crack became public enemy number one, prices for the drug fell by half (167). The failures were bipartisan and continuous. Between 1990 and 2007—years when the DEA’s budget tripled—street prices for cocaine and heroin fell by about eighty percent (177).

Crandall attributes strategic failure to the balloon effect. When drug cultivators, manufacturers, and smugglers come under pressure in one place, they shift operations elsewhere, just as a balloon squeezed in one place distends in others. As it became more difficult to send cocaine to the US via Florida, Colombian traffickers began collaborating with Mexicans who had their own cross-border smuggling networks. The flood of cocaine profits enabled the Mexican cocaine middlemen to expand their own drug-producing operations and their political power. Meanwhile, north of the border, the 1986 and 1988 Anti-Drug-Abuse Acts made it easier for US police to seize marijuana farmers’ property and impose on them longer prison terms. As a result, pot cultivation shifted to indoor grow houses. Push down, pop up.

In theory, street drug prices can be inflated by increasing downstream risk, e.g., by arresting more lower-level dealers. In practice, buy-and-bust operations accomplished little. “We were effective at putting dope on the table, and we were effective at arresting people,” one

official told Crandall. Not that it mattered. “For every one you arrested, there were two fighting to take his place” (165).

The drug trade acts as a risky equalizer in an unequal world. In 2007 Smith visited a sleepy town on the Oaxaca-Guerrero border. He observed no cars, no tractors, and few men, most having migrated in search of work. When he returned in 2015, Smith discovered a bustling, noisy boomtown. Flatbed and 4x4 trucks surrounded the town square. Drivers flashed neon underglow, gunned their engines, blasted out *narcocorrido*. Hotels and shops stood where none had stood before. The old adobe church sported a freshly painted façade with gold-leaf details and a gaudy marble interior. The local priest explained the transformation in one word: “poppies” (405).

The drug war also transformed bureaucratic prospects. DEA personnel increased fifty percent between 1985 and 1988, Smith notes. The agency’s budget and political clout soared. The Reagan-Bush drug war gave the DEA a renewed supply-control cause. The 1985 torture-murder of one of its Mexican-born agents, Kiki Camarena, gave it a martyr and a compelling story.

The DEA and other counternarcotics agencies cashed in. In Crandall’s telling, a string of new villains—Manuel Noriega, Pablo Escobar, Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán—and new drug anxieties—MDMA, crystal meth, fentanyl—kept the drug war going. So did votes for hawkish politicians in both parties who competed to take the most belligerent stances. The drug war spawned a “military-industrial-narcotics complex.” Retired Foreign Service and military officers found well-paying second careers. “If the drug war goes way, I might be unemployed,” one

military veteran and self-described right-winger tells Crandall (413). He need not worry. As far as Crandall can tell, the drug war is “a story of eternal return” (400).

It is also a story of collateral damage. Counternarcotics policing depends on informants, and informants provoke a violent, paranoid, and often preemptive response in traffickers. So do rivals, criminal or official, horning in on the trade. Prior to the 1970s, Mexican protection rackets were relatively stable. One group of police and government officials protected one dominant local trafficking organization. But as the trade and its protection became increasingly valuable, rivals such as the *Policía Judicial Federal* (PJF) moved in. A new order emerged during the 1976-1982 presidency of López Portillo. Transshipping foreign drugs, an enterprise that required none of the marijuana and poppy fields that American officials found so upsetting, became a big earner. Protection money flowed to Mexico City. Violence increased as federal interlopers pushed out local police and forced, by means of torture and murder, local traffickers to pay up.

The traffickers gunned up and fought back. During the 1990s they wrestled control of the protection rackets from the police and intelligence services. They now set the fees, policed the smuggling routes, killed unauthorized traffickers. The cartels won because they were flush with cash, while both the Mexican economy and state were weakening—a detail to which we will return.

Trade liberalization proved an added boon. In 1994, when the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) took effect, Mexican traffickers bought up warehouses and trucking companies on both sides of the border. Illicit production and distribution became increasingly global. Supply lines extended west, to China, as well as south to the Andes. Smuggling routes ran east, to Europe and Africa, as well north to the United States.

Drug trafficking, and protection rackets generally, became criminal-directed rather than state-directed enterprises. Smith, who fills *The Dope* with sharply observed anecdotes, quotes a restaurant conversation overheard by a bodyguard of Benjamín Arellano Félix, head of the Tijuana cartel. Félix's would-be interlocutor, a fat oenophile from the Mexican Attorney General's Office, anticipates a fine meal before negotiating the bribes that will enable a cushy retirement. Félix cuts him off and curses him roundly. His office has gotten its cut. No more will be coming. "You work for me now. You hear me? You're mine" (364).

Another politician who failed to get the message was President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012). With US backing, Calderón deployed his army against the cartels. Both the soldiers (whom locals in hard-hit Ciudad Juárez called "the military cartel") and the traffickers resorted to torture and murder. Between 2006 and 2012 Mexico suffered as many as sixty-five thousand drug-related murders, few of which led to prosecution, let alone conviction. During the 1990s, when the cartels had begun their takeover, the rule was one drug-related murder per day. After 2006 it was one per hour (380).

What happened in Colombia was civil war. With the fall of the Cali cartel in the mid-1990s, the cocaine industry fragmented, organizationally and territorially. Smaller cartels, paramilitary groups, and guerillas all competed to control the trade. The best known of the guerillas, the Marxist-Leninist *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), presided over "Farclandia," a remote state-within-a-state. There they encouraged peasants to grow coca. It was an easy sell, considering that *campesinos* could earn ten times their usual meager incomes.

Meanwhile US efforts to eradicate coca production in Bolivia and Peru made it economically logical to shift cultivation northward, to the point that Colombia became, by 1997, the world's leading producer of coca leaves. The FARC, which was simultaneously at war with the government and right-wing paramilitary groups (which took their own cut of the drug trade), taxed coca production and cocaine trafficking. It added to its war chest by kidnapping and extortion. All told, Crandall estimates, the fifty-year war between FARC and the state and its allied paramilitaries, which came to a negotiated end in late 2016, killed 220,000 people. It created some 7 million refugees, giving Colombia the world's highest rate of "internally displaced people." The peace that followed put no end to criminality. As many as a third of the "former" guerillas—the scare quotes are Crandall's—persisted in drug trafficking or other organized criminal activities (245).

Smith remarks a similar pattern in Mexico, where the ongoing drug war, use of informants, and targeting of cartel "kingpins" spawned more violence, more paranoia, more succession battles, and, ultimately, more cartel factions and criminal gangs. The smaller outfits, lacking connections to overseas drug sources and border smugglers, kept their US-bought guns and sustained themselves through kidnapping, robbery, forced sex work, human trafficking, illegal logging and mining, and gasoline siphoning. If Colombia had Farlandia, Mexico had Ganglandia.

El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras fared worse. Crandall, in a moment of exasperation, calls Central America's Northern Triangle a "gangster hellhole" (301). Indisputably, it is a region from which terrorized civilians flee. And they have presented the

United States with yet another form of blowback: hundreds of thousands of migrants seeking asylum.

Drugs and Thugs and *The Dope* converge on a common theme, the failure of aggressive, militarized counternarcotics policing. Where the books differ is in style, method, and authorial posture. Crandall adopts the stance of a disenchanted insider. He was, he tells us, a Washington suit who dutifully made the rounds to drug-war outposts. Border agents called him Dr. Crandall, asked if he'd like to pose with seized cannabis "as if it were a big-game trophy" (284).

Crandall knows who the real shooting victims were. He worked with Catholic Relief Services during some of the worst years of the Colombian slaughter. He tells us that he later resorted to cannabis and psilocybin to treat his PTSD. He is fed up with the drug war, personally and politically. He thinks it morally bankrupt, and wants it replaced with Portuguese- and Canadian-style decriminalization and harm-reduction approaches.

Though academically trained, Smith comes across as a hard-boiled journalist. He dishes out scoops from his interviews, field research, and archival digging with a world-weary air: Down these mean streets a historian must go. If Raymond Chandler had written a history of the drug trade, it would read like *The Dope*. Few professors can pull that off. Smith does it incredibly well.

What Smith does not do is endorse a particular policy alternative. He is certain, however, that the Mexican drug trade will continue as long as narcotics remain illegal. No licit economic activity pays as well as illicit drug production and trafficking. Some border officials will always

take bribes, and some smuggling routes will always remain open. History's lesson is that if "the war on drugs was ever really about pricing out addicts and reducing addiction, it was a dramatic and costly failure" (406).

Drugs and Thugs and *The Dope*, which together run to one thousand pages, would seem to be a case-closed indictment of police and military efforts to stop illicit narcotic production and trafficking. Yet several historical and ethical questions linger. One is whether aggressive antinarcotics policing is an inherent failure, doomed by its internal contradictions, or whether (and to what extent) its most conspicuous failures involve political, fiscal, and cultural contingencies. Other modernizing states—China after the 1949 Revolution, for example—made determined war on drugs and won.² Nor was prohibitionist success limited to despots with execution squads. Tacking to the drug-policy right of its European neighbors in the late twentieth century, Sweden had measurably fewer users of opiates, cannabis, and other illicit drugs.³

Postwar Sweden could succeed because, like postrevolutionary China, it possessed a strong, ideologically coherent state in control of its own territory. Regular taxes, not an occasional cut from protection rackets, paid for Swedish schools. Compared to Mexico and Colombia, police and bureaucratic corruption was minimal. Rule of law was the norm. Public support for strict narcotic control, particularly of amphetamine and opiates, was strong.

The same could be said of the United States in the mid-twentieth century, when narcotic use was at low ebb. Smith accuses Harry Anslinger, the head of the Bureau of Narcotics from 1930 to 1962, of "theatrical bullying" (157). Bully he did. Yet Anslinger's theatrics were part of a long, strategically coherent game. Anslinger pursued all-fronts narcotic control by limiting pharmaceutical production, discouraging marketing, minimizing diversion, interdicting

trafficking, suppressing nonmedical use, isolating addicts, forbidding maintenance, and punishing violators with mandatory minimum sentences. Everything he did was intended to limit narcotic use, particularly opiates, to narrowly defined medical purposes. For a time, and outside small subcultures, he succeeded.

Mid-century state legislators, police, medical boards, and educators supported the federal effort. School teachers fostered what one authority quoted in a curriculum guide called an “anti-narcotic conscience among the people.”⁴ The logic was straightforward. Medical addiction had by then largely disappeared. Doctors had become circumspect about prescribing narcotics, and nostrum vendors had ceased lacing their products with opiates. Most new cases of addiction arose from youthful experimentation. That remaining threat could be minimized if cultural institutions inculcated a deep, aversive response to narcotics.

Crandall quotes (mysteriously, given his policy preferences) a hawkish 1996 comment by journalist and historian Jill Jonnes: “History shows that successfully diminishing the drug culture (as America did before World War II) requires complete societal commitment. That is why the restigmatization of drugs is so important” (317). This is now a minority view. Current medical opinion holds that stigmatization puts lives in jeopardy by discouraging access to treatment and harm reduction programs and by frustrating addicts’ social reintegration. Yet Jonnes also has a point. Stigma works through primary prevention. Those who shy away from drug experimentation do not get in trouble. In staying out of trouble, however, they also stay out of sight. The benefits of primary prevention remain largely invisible. The costs, which range from gang shootouts to adulterated narcotics, remain all too visible.

Further complicating the control situation is the fact that narcotics are licit medicines as well as illicit commodities. Exposure occurs through means other than experimentation with illegally manufactured drugs. Crandall notes that the prescription-opioid “bonanza” that kicked off in the 1990s was predicated on misinformation about the addictive risk of OxyContin and other synthetic opioids (393), a development that Quinones expands on at length. Drug companies lobbied and lied; exposure increased; addiction rose through direct and indirect iatrogenesis. That is, some patients prescribed opioids for chronic noncancer pain became addicts themselves. And some of their increasingly numerous and potent pain pills were diverted, creating addiction indirectly in others.

Whether licit or illicit, drug supply matters in the long run. Crandall cites the example of Afghanistan. As narcotic production and trafficking increased there, so did addiction. Crandall estimates that, in 2010, some eight hundred thousand Afghans were addicted to opiates and other drugs, “all sharp increases from the previous decade” (312). In Mexico, a traditionally heroin- and cocaine-shy country, things changed fast when the ascendant cartels began selling in bulk to the domestic market. By 2008, Smith reports, cocaine-based drugs had replaced inhalants as Mexicans’ “drug of choice. Over 2 percent of Mexicans regularly took the product, a tenfold increase in just over twenty years” (382).

History offers many instances of drug-producing regions and countries that took to consuming large amounts of their own export. (Or of drug-consuming countries that took to cultivating large amounts of an imported drug, for example opium in late-Qing China or cannabis in post-Woodstock America.) Whatever increases the availability of potent

psychoactive drugs ultimately increases both demand and problem usage, the most extreme form of which is addiction.

If militarized drug war in the Americas has proved a costly failure, what, if anything, should take its place? The boom in Mexican-produced fentanyl and methamphetamine over the last decade complicates this question and makes it more urgent. Smith is well aware of the shift toward synthetic narcotics, but sticks to history and frames *The Dope* as a postmortem. Crandall takes a stab at policy reform. He ends up, vaguely, in the decriminalization camp.

Quinones offers more conservative counsel, which took this reviewer by surprise. Quinones and Smith are *simpatico*, both having worked in Mexico and both having criticized the drug war. Quinones has read, and handsomely blurbed, *The Dope*; and both Smith and Crandall reference Quinones's 2015 *Dreamland*. But Quinones has, in important ways, altered and extended his views since the publication of that seminal book. Peripatetic and intellectually restless, he has quizzed addicts, recovering addicts, addiction researchers, and treatment providers about the US crisis. What they said led him to put two things, narcotic supply and narcotic fungibility, front and center.

“From the road, I watched the story change,” Quinones writes in *The Least of Us* (3). In *Dreamland* he had shown how narcotic pain relievers proved addictive for many patients, particularly for those who took them regularly over an extended period of time. Others became addicted through pain-pill diversion. Either way, the result was a large new population of opioid addicts who would use whatever it took to keep withdrawal at bay. Some turned to heroin,

especially after the prescription opioid addiction epidemic alerted Mexican traffickers to expanding demand. Then, in the 2010s, chastened doctors began prescribing fewer pain pills, driving up street prices for diverted opioids. “Now the drugs came mostly from the underworld, piggybacking on the consumer market that the epidemic created. Heroin took the place of pain pills—for a while” (3). Then came heroin cut with fentanyl—a potent, easily smuggled synthetic opioid—and, finally, pure fentanyl. Some addicts who staved off opioid craving with Suboxone got high with cheap methamphetamine, another synthetic flooding the black market.

Most synthetics came from Mexico, where traffickers sourced precursor chemicals globally and targeted drug users across the United States. Save for those in the now-vulnerable Mexican poppy business, it was a virtuous economic circle. Supply had stoked demand. That demand could now be met with compact, super-addictive synthetics cheaply manufactured year round, with no concern for bulkier plant drugs or the workers who harvested them.

The wave of fentanyl, used to adulterate a variety of street drugs, and cheap methamphetamine, which was neurotoxic, put paid to the idea of recreational drug use. It was not 1968 anymore. “Now anything could kill or mentally maim,” Quinones observes. “What started as an epidemic of opiate addiction became, as I traveled, simply an epidemic of addiction, broadened by staggering supplies of corrosive synthetic dope” (4-5).

This was not how he had imagined things when he had begun writing *Dreamland*. At first Quinones thought that the root cause of the opioid addiction epidemic was economic devastation in the US heartland. That would explain the unprecedented rise in narcotic use among working-class whites in the Rustbelt and Appalachia. But subsequent reporting revealed that the plague

had spared no social group. Neuroscience told him why. Every brain had a capacity for addiction, particularly when narcotics were cheap, highly potent, and readily available.

It is on this last point that Quinones breaks with Crandall and, especially, Smith. Quinones argues that drug supply, not drug demand, is primary. Quinones is also more critical of the Mexican government, which he calls inept and corrupt. Agreeing that cartel impunity and violence have been fueled by hypocritical and unchecked gun smuggling from the United States, Quinones finds a different moral in Smith's research. The moral is that, for seven decades, "elements of the Mexican government have often controlled, guided, exploited, and aided ... traffickers ... as they morphed from illiterate rancheros to criminal capitalists, even as these government officials went through the motions of battling the drug trade" (363). The mummery helped revitalize postwar narcotic trafficking in the United States and, by exacerbating the prescription-opioid fiasco of the 1990s and early 2000s, spawned a public health addiction crisis.

Quinones sympathizes with the ideas of drug legalization and decriminalization, but rejects them as unworkable in the current American context. He has no trust that American capitalism, increasingly geared to "extracting maximum profit from products and services that neuroscience shows our brains are vulnerable to," will "do drug legalization responsibly" (365). The history of the US cigarette and alcohol industries, the proliferation of digital and food addictions, the aggressive rise of commercialized cannabis all suggest otherwise.

Decriminalization entails a different problem: It removes the most effective lever we have to push people toward sobriety. Such is the grip of cheap narcotics that many addicts will keep using them even if they end up homeless, shivering in a hoody, hallucinating in a filthy tent. "We used to believe people needed to hit rock bottom before seeking treatment," Quinones

observes. That truism fails, fatally, in the age of fentanyl and meth. “The dope is different now. Today rock bottom is death” (366).

Coercion in the form of drug-court ultimatums is therefore justified in the face of the synthetic drug onslaught. A realist, Quinones concedes that recovering addicts still face long odds. But the more abundant and potent the narcotics on the street, the greater the chance that they will relapse and die. To the oft-repeated cliché, “We can’t arrest our way out of this,” Quinones replies, “We can’t treat our way out of it, either, as long as supply is so potent and cheap” (364).

Quinones extends the point. In his view the country is awash, not just with bad drugs, but with bad, sugary foods and other bad, habit-forming products. Alcohol and digitized gambling can produce states of habituation and isolation as profound as narcotic addiction. Properly understood, the crisis of addiction to opioids and other synthetic drugs is an extreme manifestation of a four-decades-long American “surrender” to brain-rewarding products that has sickened and addicted millions of individuals, alienating them from the society in which they once actively, and healthfully, participated (155).

It is an arresting thought. Better, however, strike “American” and substitute “global” to describe the recent past and future prospect of a technologically supercharged, internationally sourced limbic-capitalist order. And better to backdate the emergence of that order to the transportation and industrial revolutions that, more than two centuries ago, accelerated the trade in cheap intoxicants. It was, in fact, concern over their growing availability that prompted the early twentieth-century regulatory and prohibitionist regimes. That reform effort fell most

heavily (and durably) on nonmedical narcotic use and trafficking, understood as especially grave threats to personal health and national vitality.⁵

Crandall's and Smith's essential point is that bureaucratic aggrandizement, hard-ball diplomacy, and culture-war politicking escalated this narcotic exceptionalism into full-blown drug warring, with consequences both bloody and lasting. Yet, both authors would agree that, should drugs be legalized tomorrow, trafficking organizations would hardly fold their tents, having long since diversified into other forms of armed parasitism. Nor would they quit selling drugs, given the opportunity to undercut taxed, regulated markets, as has happened in states with an ostensibly legal cannabis industry.⁶

Quinones's essential point is that drug-war retreat should not turn into a legalization rout, both for the sake of minimizing new cases of addiction and for getting those already addicted into life-saving treatment and long-term recovery. His stance recalls the doctrine of minimal deterrence that emerged from the early 1980s debates over nuclear weapons, another technology that bade fair to "bring the human race to its knees." Some critics favored unilateral nuclear disarmament. Solly Zuckerman and his minimalist allies argued that, while escalation should be avoided and deep cuts were in order, nuclear arsenals should be maintained at a level sufficient to deter attacks from nuclear-armed opponents.⁷ The same point applies to criminal (and, calling to mind the US opioid litigation, civil) sanctions for violating narcotic regulations and prohibitions. We need sufficient deterrent force to foster primary prevention, impose risk from law enforcement, and maintain pressure to seek treatment.

One thing on which Crandall, Smith, and Quinones do agree, despite their differing policy preferences, is that we long ago overshot the minimal deterrence mark for narcotic drugs.

To this Quinones adds that we undershot the mark for other potentially addictive products churned out by the sophisticated system of limbic capitalism in which narcotics are embedded. Drugs come in many forms. We do not make war on them all.

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Notes

¹ McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men*, 218.

² See Courtwright, *Age of Addiction*, 125-26.

³ See Knutsson, “Swedish Drug Markets and Drugs Policy,” and United Nations, Office on Drugs and Crime, *Sweden’s Successful Drug Policy*.

⁴ West Virginia State Department of Education, *A Guide for Teachers*, 83.

⁵ See Courtwright, *Age of Addiction*, chapters. 2-4.

⁶ In May 2022, for example, an estimated three-quarters of the marijuana sold in California remained illegally produced and marketed. See Goldstein and Sumner, “Why Legal Weed is Losing.”

⁷ See Zuckerman, *Nuclear Illusion and Reality*.