



The Myth of the Addicted Army: Vietnam and the Modern War on Drugs (Culture, Politics, and the Cold War)

Jeremy Kuzmarov

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The image of the drug-addicted American soldier—disheveled, glassy-eyed, his uniform adorned with slogans of antiwar dissent—has long been associated with the Vietnam War. More specifically, it has persisted as an explanation for the U.S. defeat, the symbol of a demoralized army incapable of carrying out its military mission.

Yet as Jeremy Kuzmarov documents in this deeply researched book, popular assumptions about drug use in Vietnam are based more on myth than fact. Not only was alcohol the intoxicant of choice for most GIs, but the prevalence of other drugs varied enormously. Although marijuana use among troops increased over the course of the war, for the most part it remained confined to rear areas, and the use of highly addictive drugs like heroin was never as widespread as many imagined.

Like other cultural myths that emerged from the war, the concept of an addicted army was first advanced by war hawks seeking a scapegoat for the failure of U.S. policies in Vietnam, in this case one that could be linked to "permissive" liberal social policies and the excesses of the counterculture. But conservatives were not alone. Ironically, Kuzmarov shows, elements of the antiwar movement also promoted the myth, largely because of a presumed alliance between Asian drug traffickers and the Central Intelligence Agency. While this claim was not without foundation, as new archival evidence confirms, the left exaggerated the scope of addiction for its own political purposes.

Exploiting bipartisan concern over the perceived "drug crisis," the Nixon administration in the early 1970s launched a bold new program of federal antidrug measures, especially in the international realm. Initially, the "War on Drugs" helped divert attention away from the failed quest for "peace with honor" in Southeast Asia. But once institutionalized, it continued to influence political discourse as well as U.S. drug policy in the decades that followed.

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