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CHAPTER ONE

MYTH AND SYMBOLISM IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF  
DRUG POLICIES IN THE UNITED STATES

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Various studies of the major drugs and their regulation suggest two principal forces or interests that shape decisions to permit or prohibit these substances. The first is oligopoly -- private economic groups or the state wish to monopolize a substance or to protect their existing oligopoly from competing drugs. A second factor is moral or political entrepreneurship -- dominant groups seek to restrict a substance as a means of repressing ethnic, class or other rival groups. To these factors we might add a third, especially with reference to the \$40 billion per annum War on Drugs in the United States (Drug Policy Alliance, 2002): bureaucratic politics -- the protection or aggrandizement of regulatory agencies or professions.

Our concern in this chapter, however, is the rhetorical or symbolic processes by which these interests are deployed in political space—for example, how a substance is rhetorically transformed from "food" to "drug" or from "drug" to "dangerous" or "non-medical" drug, and how use and users are labeled as normal, social, addict, sinful, dangerous, criminal, fiendish, or subversive. Thus the degree of danger, toxicity, or some other apparently neutral or factual aspect of drugs may have little to do with the character and degree of their regulation. Instead, such apparently objective aspects of drugs are highly variable in observational practice and differently invoked in public discourse on the same substance in different historical periods and social places. For example, cocaine was celebrated as the “champagne of drugs” in much of mainstream public discourse in the 1980s, until its use spread to the lower classes in smokable forms such as crack or freebase, where it was recast as the cause of urban poverty and crime. Likewise, Alfred Lindesmith (1965) theorized that marihuana had been made immoral and illegal because of its association with the lower classes, and that America had a dual system for controlling opiate use—treatment for the upper class and jail for everyone else (Mandel 1975). It

seems that drug controls sometimes have as much to do with class structures as with chemical properties or effects (Himmelestein 1978: 38).

Obviously, not all conditions that hurt people become classified as social problems, and many so-called social problems actually benefit a variety of groups and constituencies. The difference, then, lies in whose power is augmented and whose power is threatened by the problem, and in the ability of those groups to rally support for their particular view or construction of that problem (Edelman 1988: 12-21). From this relativist, comparative historical, and social constructionist viewpoint, dominant moral and political discourses define which substances, experiences, and behaviors are to be taken as good or evil, legal or illegal, normal or deviant. Such logical oppositions (e.g. medical vs. recreational) readily become moral hierarchies. The allocating of persons and practices into subordinate categories within these hierarchies also constitutes them as subordinate persons or practices in the social hierarchy. Thus, categories of moral value, hierarchies of social worth, and structures of domination tend to converge. In this view, social conflict is composed of multiple continuous jurisdictional disputes over the boundaries and interpretation of the relevant categories, and of jurisprudential disputes over who and what shall be their incumbents. Hence the dominance of one moral discourse or one set of categories, and the dominance of certain political positions and social groups, are entangled. Logical hierarchies in languages become social and moral hierarchies in practice.

Morality is naturalized through discursive practices that make it appear to coalesce in substances or persons and not in the very practices that constitute them as whatever they are taken to be. This naturalism of morality is not because our words reflect a reality external to discourse, but because the discursive construction of the reality is operating so transparently that

it goes unnoticed. Thus, to reveal the practices by which things and actions, or drugs and their uses, take on meaning is to disclose the ideology that is encoded in the "modes or production" of moral norms.

In seeking to define realities, political speech seeks to be non-political (that is, objective, merely descriptive). Such speech is mythic in the sense that "Myth is depoliticized speech" (Barthes 1972:142-145). Mythic speech tries to make things that are constructed and contingent appear natural, self-evident and eternal -- as though they could not, and should not, be any other way. Myth is thus received by the addressee as "innocent speech" because the partiality of its point of view has become invisible, leaving only facts to be accepted without questioning. Yet specific language choices necessarily evoke certain moral and conceptual frames, and these subconsciously influence subjects' choices (Lakoff 2004). Drug advocates, reformers, and repressors typically try to naturalize and make innocent their speech by essentializing the properties of a substance, its users, or its effects. In contrast, this chapter attempts to unravel the politics of mythic speech and to show how the social construction of the naturalized reality that it presents is accomplished.

### Discourse and Classification

In the discourse on drugs, key distinctions in the logical and social hierarchy include food/drug, legal/illegal, medical/recreational, soft/hard, and other pairs in which the first term is socially preferred. The discursive constitution of such distinctions has been a prime achievement of drug regulators, especially in America, from about 1880 to 1935. During that period, this classificatory order was largely established and the major drugs were allocated within it. Neither

alcohol, tobacco, and caffeine, nor opiates, cocaine, or marijuana were topics of moral concern or public policy in America in 1850, although all these substances except marijuana were widely used. But as the new classification system was established in popular discourse and then in law and law enforcement, alcohol was made illegal along with cocaine, opiates, and finally marijuana. Of the major drugs, only caffeine and nicotine were left outside (or rather on the good side) of this system, a system and regime that continues (with a reversal on alcohol) to this day.

A classification system based on such politically motivated distinctions is bound to breed contradictions. Thus it was not considered strange that members of the Women's Christian Temperance Union could rail against alcohol by day and drink their opium (in the form of "women's tonics") by night. More recently, A New York Times editorial, guided by the categorical distinction between heroin (bad) and methadone (good), described methadone as a drug that "cloaks the craving for heroin." One could say with equal logic that Coca-Cola blocks the craving for Pepsi-Cola. That is, the Times' statement is nonsense because heroin and methadone are both opiates, but it makes sense because it fits the existing categorical order, since methadone is legal as a controlled substitute for illegal heroin.

Guided by these kinds of categorical assumptions, Representative Charles Rangel, a Democrat from New York, spurned all talk about decriminalization of illegal drugs as the chatter of eggheads. In a 1988 New York Times op-ed piece, he wrote: "Let's take this legalization issue and put it where it belongs—amid idle chit-chat as cocktail glasses knock together at social events." Mr. Rangel failed to notice that the alcohol in the glasses may be as bad as the stuff on the streets. But our classifications permit a majority of Americans to live well enough with one kind of drug while "forcing a minority to murder and die for the other" (Gould 1990). With the

same categorical blindness, William Bennett, the "drug czar" of the Bush Administration, called drugs (meaning illegal drugs) the number one national problem, even while he smoked three packs of cigarettes a day. Since tobacco is legal, how could it be dangerous?

The capacity to construct and legitimize realities and repress alternative lifeworlds and systems of meaning is a key form of power. Foucault (1972:82) characterizes such subordinated discourses as "a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated; naive knowledge, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity." By de-legitimizing the institutional use of subordinated discourses, the subordinate status of their adherents is maintained. The subjugated discourse does not provide sufficient "symbolic capital" to be used in institutional relations. Instead individuals are obliged to adopt the dominant definition of reality in order to participate in the institutions, thereby denying the reality and validity of their own experience. This is true whether those who are subordinated are activists or social scientists who have been marginalized because they are critical of current drugs policies, or ethnic groups like Chinese, Mexicans, or African Americans who have been marginalized by various anti-drug campaigns.

### The Social Construction of the Drug Problem

How does the use of particular drugs become a public problem? Whose drug and whose behavior will be defined as the problem? Whose morality will prevail? No behavior is inherently a social problem. Social problems are "symbolic public realities" that come into existence through the negotiation of the rules by which "drug" or "food" and "dangerous" or "normal" are defined. With heroin use in the U.S. in the 1970s, for example, rates of urban crime

first had to be recognized as a matter of public concern, and then linked with drug use, before "drug addiction" could emerge as a public issue. Moreover, continuing efforts must be made to maintain definitions of some drugs as dangerous and others as legitimate—or even as not drugs at all—in the face of counter-claims, such as the fact in the U.S. alcohol and tobacco kill over 30 times the number of people killed by all illicit drugs combined.

Various constituencies may acquire stakes in the definition of certain behaviors as a social problem; they also may identify such behaviors with a particular ethnic or racial group, and thence use the label "sick", "immoral" or "criminal" to regulate such ethnic "others." For example, temperance laws in the United States were used by white Protestants of northern European descent to regulate the conduct of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. Similarly, in Colombia today there is verbal and sometimes military conflict concerning the moral and legal status of cocaine. Some groups compare their country's role as an exporter to that of Canada when it exported alcohol legally produced in Canada to the United States, where it was illegal under Prohibition. However, other Colombians, often military officials seeking helicopters or ministers seeking aid, adopt the war-on-drugs position espoused by the U.S. government.

The use of marihuana and other then-illegal drugs by middle-class youths in the 1960s provides another example of these symbolic-political processes. The cultural and political revolts of the 1960s were led by young people who were represented in public imagery as users of marihuana, LSD, and amphetamines, which produced sensory and sensual experiences that transformed their realities. This linkage of drug use and cultural change allowed people to champion or damn the use of certain drugs as a metaphor for their general political orientations.

In sum, directives such as drug laws and policies have a strong symbolic and ritualistic component.

Today there are two major official strategies for such symbolization. One is legal, the other medical. The discourse of legality categorizes certain substances as illicit consumer items and defines users or merchants as criminal. Crimes are then interdicted and criminals apprehended and punished. The other rhetorical strategy is medical. It consists of defining the user as pathological. The solution here is to stop the epidemics, not the shipment, and to treat instead of punish. This strategy also condemns the user, but not as severely as the legal criminal discourse. Unlike "criminality" which derives from bad character, "illness" is caused by external contagion. Hence the medical vocabulary partly absolves the user of responsibility, thereby facilitating a "cure".

Each of these two strategies privileges different agents, agencies, and occupational and political groups. The legal approach fixes attention on the drug user as agent and defines illegal drugs as a problem that is "owned" by legislators, police, judges, lawyers, and wardens. The second, medical approach focuses on the substance as agency and empowers persons and groups who are expert on the biochemical properties of drugs and the social-psychological characteristics of users—that is, specialists such as physicians, pharmacologists, psychologists, educators, and epidemiologists. Of course, symbolization is ever changing, and no single interpretation of a problem or substance is likely to remain unchallenged for long (see Goodman 1978: 70).

A third discourse on drug policies may be called critical. This discourse challenges the basic assumptions of both the legal and therapeutic symbolizations and tries to open cognitive

and political space for public discussion of alternate drug policies. However, the difficulties encountered by this discourse can be seen in the responses to the suggestion by Jocelyn Elders, then serving as U.S. Surgeon General, that alternatives to our current policies of criminalization should be studied. President Clinton totally disassociated himself from her statement and Senator Robert Dole called for her resignation.

In deconstructing such terms as "criminal" or "pathological," the critical discourse tends to be more morally neutral, and to validate different patterns of drug use as personal or group choices. "The drug user, like the alcohol user, now becomes someone who follows a different, yet morally acceptable, life style. The drug abusers, like the chronic alcoholic, may be seen as a social problem, but that is far from the naming of drug use as socially deviant. It is an admission of the plural character of the society and a legitimization of behavior which is morally reprehensible and anxiety-provoking for many" (Gusfield 1981). Thus the critical discourse tends to legitimate the cultural changes of the 1960s by underlining the character of drug use as social protest. Moreover, by framing drug regulation as political repression, the critical discourse makes law and therapy appear as rhetorics of domination rather than rational expressions of societal consensus, or enlightened social engineering.

The shifts in public discussion of marijuana from the days of "reefer madness" in the 1930s to the partial tolerance of it today illustrates the competition between these three discourses. The beliefs that marijuana was addictive and physiologically harmful, that it drove users to fiendish crimes, and that it was a first step towards heroin addiction, all have ceased to be conventional wisdom. Another example of such shifts in discourses on drugs is provided by recent controversies over cocaine. In a well-publicized 1977 article entitled "The Cocaine

Scene," Newsweek stated: "Pinstriped Wall Street lawyers take it from 14-karat gold spoons at elegant parties... Among hostesses in the smart sets of Los Angeles and New York, a little cocaine, like Dom Perignon and beluga caviar, is now de rigueur at dinners.... *But cocaine is not a narcotic, is not addictive and causes no withdrawal symptoms. Taken in moderation, cocaine probably causes no significant mental or physical.*" (Emphasis added). By contrast, in 1991 Robert C. Booner, Administrator of the Drug Enforcement Administration, complained: "We remain challenged in all areas. Cocaine represents the most serious problem this country has ever faced, and it is a problem that is currently spreading across Europe."

Here we have a shift of metaphors in just over a decade—from cocaine as caviar to cocaine as crisis. As cocaine use became more prevalent in lower income areas, "Wall Street lawyers" were replaced by "minorities," and "smart sets" by "inner cities." Although the language of drug policy has changed over time, the physio-chemical properties of drugs have remained the same. But language and social reality have indeed been modified. During the past two decades (in English and Spanish and other languages), words like 'narco-trafficking', 'narco-terrorism', 'druglords', 'drug cartels', 'snowcap nations' and so on have appeared as defining terms for both domestic problems and international affairs (Henaó 1992). To impose such metaphors on others is an act of power, for it redefines reality. Metaphors highlight some aspects of experience and conceal others. By accepting another's metaphor as a true definition of reality, one also implicitly accepts the grounds warranting future action (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 4, 156-184).

The Deadly Myth of the War on Drugs

One or another "war on drugs" has been significant in American politics and history for over a century. Major campaigns include the anti-Chinese/anti-opium movement that began in the 1880's, the anti-cocaine/anti-Negro movement a bit later, the anti-alcohol/anti-immigrant Prohibition Amendment of 1919 to 1933, the omnibus antidrug Harrison Act of 1914, and the Marijuana Tax Act of 1937.

In the 1940s, with a literal war to fight, the drug war became a lower intensity struggle and remained so for two decades. Harry Anslinger, who ruled the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (FBN) from 1930-62, resisted the anti-marijuana hysteria early in the 1930's, but by mid-decade he championed laws against what he called "the assassin weed" and "killer drug." His ideas and policies ruled supreme in the drug field for several decades. Anslinger saw illegal drugs as an evil that society must combat with undercover agents, informers, wiretaps, and all other possible tools. The drug war for Anslinger was against the Chinese Tongs, the fascist Japanese, the Red Chinese, Castro's Cuba, long-haired hippies, and licentious blacks. The targets changed with the political times, but the metaphor of war remained constant (Mandel 1975).

By the late 1940s and early 1950s, the FBN had hegemony in matters of drug control policy. It had the support (or at least the acquiescence) of the nation's medical and public health establishments. Dissenting voices were few, and they were paid for their insolence with FBN harassment. The 1950s were for the most part good years for the FBN, which was successful in procuring strengthened penalties for violations of existing drug legislation in the 1951 Boggs Act and 1956 Narcotics Control Act. The hegemony of the FBN began to break down in the late 1950s, however, initially as a result of the resurgence of medical and public health interest

groups concerned with drugs. There was further attrition of the prior consensus in the late 1960's as marijuana use increased among affluent youths, partly as a symbol of social protest.

President Nixon revived the drug war in the 1960's in response to anti-war protests, the civil rights movement, and general cultural rebellion. For example, Myles Ambrose, head of ODALE (Office of Drug Abuse Law Enforcement), a special creation of President Nixon that preceded the Drug Enforcement Administration, had this to say about his mission: "'The War Against Drug Abuse,' ...[is not] runaway rhetoric...We are in a war and we mean to win it... Those who smuggle heroin into this country are among the most sophisticated and inventive criminals in the world... Our program is using every resource available... to wage an all-out, fully-coordinated attack against the drug problem."

John Bartels, an assistant in ODALE under Ambrose, continued this verbal aggression when he became head of the DEA in 1973. In testimony before Congress, Bartels linked Timothy Leary with cannabis and LSD traffickers, even though Leary had been in jail (or Algeria) during the three years when his organization was supposedly dealing heavily. President Nixon himself often spoke of illegal drugs in terms of war: "Drug abuse...is America's 'Public Enemy No. 1.' It is an all-pervasive and yet elusive enemy...the only effective way to fight this menace is by attacking it on many fronts."

Rather than responding to public fears, the Nixon White House used the media as a tool to create public fears of a heroin epidemic (Epstein 1977:138-139). If the Nixon White House intended to escalate popular concern about drugs, they were notably successful. The percentage naming drugs as the "most important problem" facing the country rose sharply in 1971 from previous years and reached an all-time high in 1973. Nearly one-fifth of Americans named drugs

as the primary national problem in 1973. By that time, Congressional attention to the issue had peaked, and the key legislation of the Nixon drug war—the Drug Abuse Office and Treatment Act of 1972—had been passed.

Conservative politicians seem especially eager to go to war on drugs, perhaps as an alternative to a war on poverty. Often the war is started at the beginning of a term and victory is declared at the end. Thus in his 1988 State of the Union address, Ronald Reagan proclaimed the war on drugs to be almost over. It was, he said, "an untold American success story." Like every war, it had its heroes. Reagan paid special tribute to his wife, Nancy, "who helped so many of our young people to say no to drugs." (The Progressive 1989: 8-9).

During the presidential campaign of 1988 between Vice President Bush and Governor Dukakis, the drug issue was often in the political spotlight. According to opinion polls, illegal drugs had been made into the nation's leading concern. Stories about crack dealers and drug busts were featured every day as leads in newspapers and on television. The presidential candidates competed to propose solutions and Congress worked overtime to pass a multibillion-dollar drug control act. The concern continued into President Bush's first year in office. "This scourge will end" he promised in his inaugural address. And on September 5, 1989, the President devoted an entire nationally televised speech to drugs. Holding up a bag of crack, the President again invoked the metaphor of war:

But turf battles won't win this war. Teamwork will... The basic weapons we need are the ones we already have. What has been lacking is a strategy to effectively use them... Of course, victory will take hard work and time... But the war on drugs will be hard-won, neighborhood by neighborhood, block by block, child by child. If we fight this war as a divided nation, then the war is lost. But if we face this evil as a nation united, this will be nothing but a handful of useless chemicals

[Holds up bag]. Victory. Victory over drugs is our cause, a just cause, and with your help, we are going to win (New York Times, 6 September, 1989).

In this excerpt and throughout his speech, President Bush employed numerous signifiers of war: "battle zones," "turf battles," "weapons," "teamwork," "threats," "strategy," "plans," "interdiction," "mobilization," "fighting," "block by block," "victory," "just cause," and "winning." Immediately after the speech, major metropolitan areas were visited by drug administrators who spoke in support of the president's strategy. Political analysts discussed the war on drugs in their newspaper columns. The war was featured on the cover of major news magazines. That the public was truly concerned about the drug crisis and approved of the president's war effort was affirmed in the public opinion polls, though this concern had at least partially been stirred by the administration's focus on drugs to begin with. With a flurry of news coverage and massive security protection, President Bush attended a drug summit in Colombia. He ordered increased efforts at surveillance, search and seizure, and interdiction. Three months after the speech, U.S. troops invaded Panama and seized Manuel Noriega in what could be called the largest drug bust in history. Bush justified the invasion of Panama and the deposing of Noriega in terms of the war on drugs. Once again the war on drugs emerged not only as political spectacle and a justification for foreign invasion and death, but also as a definition of reality.

The war metaphor was not confined to the White House, nor to the political right wing. For example, Dennis Dayle, the hero of The Underground Empire (1986) and Director of CENTAC (the short-lived Central Tactical Unit of the Justice Department) advocated a "world war" against drugs as the U.S. government's single most important task:

People have to take sides, as they did in World War II, where there was a total commitment within the Allied and Axis camps. One side was going to win and the other side was going to lose. There would be no middle ground. Have these drug-controlled countries decided where they want to stand? ..We must clearly identify the enemy, set out to do something that can be done, and then do it. We need a clear victory against a globally accepted enemy.

The reverend Jesse Jackson (1989:8-11) exhorted in a similar spirit from the left:

Drug lords are the masters and drug users are the slaves... This drug trade must be crushed and the drug lords must be busted... Cut the supply at the sources, strengthen interdiction, educate the innocent, rehabilitate the sick, and enforce swift and tough punishment for the purveyors of death—the drug lords who are nothing more than terrorists... Drugs are poison. Taking drugs is a sin. Drug use is morally debased and sick...

Some four years later, however, the "war on drugs" was a non-issue in the 1992 presidential campaign between George Bush and Bill Clinton. Bush had little success to show for his war on drugs; indeed, the claims of critics that the war had failed (or was itself the problem) were gaining increasing credence. Moreover the right wing rhetoric of punishment had worn thin with many voters. Bill Clinton may not have believed in the efficacy of the war on drugs and opposed its punitive and imperialistic tendencies, but he had no alternative plan. Moreover, Clinton wished to avoid the charge of being "soft on drugs"—a perception that was already latent because of his admitted experimentation with marijuana and his lack of military service. Thus, for different reasons, the war on drugs was not discussed by either candidate in the 1992 campaign. This war on drugs continues to receive little attention today in the rhetoric of the current Bush administration, due at least in part to a preoccupation with the new "war on terrorism" that, as is the case with the renewed opium production in Afghanistan, often contradicts the goals of its predecessor.

In sum, then, and with some rare exceptions (Carter, Clinton) for most of this century the chiefs of drug enforcement agencies and the President and White House staffs have argued that illegal drugs are menacing, that they should be hunted out and eradicated, and that the effort is a crusade, a campaign, a war.

### Myth, Metaphor, and the Media: The Construction of a Symbolic Public Reality

A mythic interpretation of the drug war also is invited by the theatrical character of many of the battles and announcements of the war itself. After all, many drug busts are themselves staged events (although the dealers may be unwitting participants). One example involved Marion Barry, then Mayor of Washington, D.C. Barry visited his ex-girlfriend in a Washington hotel room, where he was introduced to another woman who turned out to be an undercover FBI agent. From this second woman, Barry allegedly bought crack cocaine, which he then smoked. The whole episode was recorded by a hidden video camera. As Barry got up to leave, law enforcement agents who had been camped in the two adjoining rooms burst in and arrested him. Parts of the police video was shown on TV and also used in the trial, which was celebrated in the media as low comedic spectacle. Barry spent some months in an executive prison and then returned to win a seat on the D.C. City Council. His portrayal of himself as a victim of white racist political propaganda was persuasive to many of his constituents.

As mentioned earlier, another semi-spectacle was the elder George Bush holding a bag of crack as he declared war on drugs in his nationally televised address. He and his audience were supposed to be shocked that crack cocaine was being sold "across the street from the White House." However, it was later revealed that much inept back stage management had gone into

producing this slick front stage appearance (see Goffman 1959). The agent whose job it was to record the purchase of three ounces of crack in Lafayette Square on videotape was assaulted by a homeless person and missed the dramatic moment. The other agent, who made the purchase, failed to record his conversation with the dealer because his microphone went out. The dangerous criminal dealer, an 18-year-old Washington schoolboy, almost missed the appointment because he didn't know where the White House was. "Oh, you mean where Reagan lives!" he said, finally pinning down its location.

The drug entrepreneurs of Medellin also have made the political symbolic. The highly publicized "surrender" of Juan Pablo Escobar to Colombian authorities in 1991, in exchange for an amnesty and a guarantee that he would not be extradited to the United States, was the second such gesture he had made in a month. When finally Escobar was put in "prison" with much media ado, it turned out that he could come and go as he pleased and that he himself had constructed the jail as a vacation home complete with jacuzzi, escape passages, narco-chicas and other amenities.

The linguistic classification of government action in relation to certain drugs as a "war" also has practical moral and political consequences: it normalizes some kinds of conduct that in a peacetime situation would be impermissible. Thus William Bennett, the national "drug czar" in the Bush Administration, said: "It's a funny war when the 'enemy' is entitled to due process and a fair trial. By the way, I'm in favor of a fair trial, but it kind of slows things down" (Fortune March 12, 1990:74). In this kind of rhetoric children who use illegal drugs become "casualties" of the "chemical warfare" waged on the United States by "enemy" (exporting) nations. Martial law, or something close to it in the form of suspension of civil rights, seizure of private property,

or summary executions, becomes normalized as part of the "war". Even beheading the enemy may become "morally proportional to the nature of the offense". "Beheading?" asked talk-show host Larry King when he interviewed William Bennett. "Morally," replied the drug czar, "I don't have any problem with that" (cited in Herrer 2003). Users of illegal drugs become "addicts," "scum," or "sick", illegal entrepreneurs become feudal "barons," "king(pin)s" or "lords." The blame for the crisis, according to President Bush's speech on September 5, 1989, was "everyone who uses drugs, everyone who sells drugs and everyone who looks away." Thus virtually anyone who does not avidly support the "war" can easily be blamed for the "major threat to national security" and thereby defined as a traitor. Likewise, the inner cities become the "frontlines" where, as in Vietnam, the danger is greater because it is difficult to tell who is friend or foe. Young black males especially are perceived as likely foes, either in the form of "pushers," or "addicts" ready to rob or kill to "get their fix."

The mass media also have largely adopted the metaphor of war. This "battleground," as Roger Wilkins put it in a Frontline documentary, is inhabited by "throwaway people." "DRUGS," shouted the four-and-a-half-inch headline of CBS's full page ad of September 6, 1989, for a week of special reports on the drug story. "ONE NATION, UNDER SIEGE... America is at war," the text declared, "and the enemy has already taken the streets." The Connie Chung Saturday night special of September 30, 1989, attempted to milk the story of an underage dealer for forty unilluminating minutes, casting an actor to play the part of the dealer while the real young man was in police custody. Chung's report did have, however, serve as a reminder that the war on drugs is also being waged for rating points (Gitlin 1989:17).

The recent "war" against the "cocaine epidemic" generated its own new set of icons—this time more stylish but also more cynical than those of earlier days, such as Crockett and Tubbs in television's Miami Vice. In 1990 NBC showed Drug Wars: The Camarena Story, a docu-drama (by Miami Vice producer Michael Mann) about Kiki Camarena, the Drug Enforcement Administration agent who was kidnapped and murdered in Mexico in 1985.

"The usual America-against-the-world trappings were there, updated for the 1990s: in the place of stolid Russians, we had sleazy Mexicans; instead of sadistic commissars, ruthless drug traffickers; instead of Communism, cocaine. For six hours spread over three nights, clean-cut American agents battled shifty, unshaven Mexicans, who had bad teeth and a habit of throwing beer bottles from speeding cars. Ivan the Terrible was replaced by Juan the Dirtball... Most serious of all, Drug Wars makes the case for a more activist U.S. policy in Latin America, spearheaded by the D.E.A. The series was essentially an extended advertisement for the drug agency (which provided guidance to the producers). Just as that old TV series The FBI buffed the image of J. Edgar Hoover's G-men, Drug Wars seeks to win the D.E.A. a larger constituency" (Massing 1990:152).

Films also help create an iconography for the war on drugs. In 1971 and 1972, during the height of the now forgotten "heroin epidemic," the Academy Award winning movies The French Connection and The Godfather were intimately connected with drugs. Actors who starred in drug films include Frank Sinatra (Man with the Golden Arm), Gene Hackett (French Connection), Marlon Brando (The Godfather), Susan Black (Pym), Kris Kristofferson (Cisco Pike), Jimmy Clift (The Harder They Come), and Anthony Quinn (The House on 110th Street). Perhaps the drug film industry's most important leading man at the time was Al Pacino, who played either law breaker or law enforcer in The Godfather, Serpico, Panic in Needle Park, and Carlito's Way.

As efforts to frame the war on drugs in a heroic light have increased, the political

discourse of Washington and the media discourse of Hollywood have become more and more alike. For example, William Bennett invoked mythical film figures to project and legitimate the drug war. Bennett compared taking back the streets from cocaine dealers to an old western with Henry Fonda, or Clint Eastwood in High Plains Drifter, in which "The whole town hides in cowardice and is finished." In these films, Bennett noted, the "good guys" take the town back from the "bad guys". "To have a chance to take action and not to take it makes you morally complicit," with the bad guys, Bennett told a reporter (Kohn 1989:41,97).

The current Bush administration has, as mentioned previously, been caught between two often competing mythic wars (on terrorism and on drugs). The contradictions between the two are evident in the U.S. government's dealings with the Taliban in Afghanistan. Before September 11, 2001, the Taliban had received a \$43 million gift from the U.S. for their efforts to eradicate opium cultivation, despite that regime's disregard for women's rights and despite their refusal to turn over Osama Bin Laden, already a wanted terrorist, to the United Kingdom (Scheer 2001). Once the "war on terror" began, the Taliban were toppled by U.S. forces, but opium production began again in earnest, and Afghanistan was soon producing 70 percent of the world's opium (Bovard 2002).

The Bush administration has tried to merge these two wars in the public imagination by emphasizing that the money spent on illegal drugs is funneled into a host of underground sources, including terrorist networks. When President Bush signed the Drug-Free Communities Act, he said "If you quit drugs, you join the fight against terror." Similarly, the Office of National Drug Control Policy spent \$3 million for two ads during the 2002 Super Bowl asking "Where do terrorists get their money?" and revealing "If you buy drugs, some of it might come from you"

(Bovard 2002). But the highly convenient equating of drug use with support for terrorism seems to have failed to strike a chord with the public. 19.5 million adults in the U.S. currently use illicit drugs, and it appears that few of them instantly re-imagined themselves as terrorist sympathizers thanks to this campaign. What's more, such a rhetorical association glosses over too many inconvenient facts, such as the government's own history of giving money directly to terrorist regimes like the Taliban, and the fact that illegality itself is what makes the drug trade so profitable for organized criminal networks. Despite the holes in this logic, however, the association of drugs with terrorism provides a rationale for continuing the current war on drugs—now as part of an even more urgent, more international war with even greater global political and economic implications.

### Conclusion

Drugs and drug problems are social constructions. The transformation from substance to drug is not, after all, a chemical one; it occurs over years and decades as various groups and constituencies vie for the political and economic power that comes with controlling the terms of debate. As such, those with a vested economic or political interest in a substance's legality generally struggle to see it defined as a food, beverage, or other recreation, while those whose finances or authority are threatened by the use of a particular substance will generally try to categorize it as a dangerous drug, and to foster its symbolic association with despised enemies or threatening "others." Though science is often invoked in such debates, the rhetoric surrounding drug use has relied chiefly on emotional appeals, stoking excitement about new substances or creating fears of a growing epidemic. The history of the U.S. war on drugs provides one such

example, but there are many others to be explored in the following chapters. Drug policies exist at the intersection of political-economic struggle and rhetorical strategy and, as such, demonstrate the importance of myth and symbolism in the construction of drugs in particular, and social reality in general.