

A review of Alfred McCoy's *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia* by James Quigley

Background

In a recent conversation with a Member of the Board of Directors of the Air America Association, he mentioned to me that the origin of the allegation that Air America had been involved in drug trafficking was a book by Alfred McCoy entitled, *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia*. I was not familiar with the book, but resolved to read it. As it happens I read two books by Alfred W. McCoy. The first, *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia*, was written by McCoy with two co-authors and published in 1972. The 1972 version of the book was revised in 2003 and published under the title: *The Politics of Heroin: CIA complicity in the global drug trade, Afghanistan, Southeast Asia, Central America, Columbia*.

One week after our conversation, as if on cue, Mr. McCoy and the 2003 version of his book was cited as a source by Larry Chin in an article written for the San Francisco Chronicle, in which Mr. Chin asserted that "Air America was involved in various aspects of the Indochinese war and clandestine operations, including (but not limited to) narcotics trafficking..."¹ Four days later the BBC News Online carried a news report by Penny Spiller under the headline, "Laos' controversial exile" dealing with the recent arrest of General Vang Pao. Ms. Spiller described Alfred McCoy as a "respected US historian."²

Review and Commentary

The 2003 revised edition of Mr. McCoy's book contains the following biographical data, "Alfred W. McCoy is professor of Southeast Asian History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Educated at Columbia and Yale, he has spent the past thirty years writing about Southeast Asian history and politics. The first edition of this book published in 1972 as *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia*, sparked controversy, but is now regarded as a "classic work" and has been translated into nine languages."³ After reading the BBC's description of Alfred McCoy as a "respected US historian" and the biographical information contained in his 2003 book, a casual reader may be forgiven for concluding that the original book, *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia*, published in 1972 was written by an experienced scholar, a professor at the University of Wisconsin. Wrong. As he acknowledges in the Preface to the 2003 edition, Mr. McCoy wrote original book, *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia* when he was twenty five years of age and in his second year at Yale Graduate School.⁴ Much of the research for the book was performed "During spring break 1971..."⁵ In 1971, Mr. McCoy traveled to France to interview French officers, *about the opium trade during their Indochina War of the early 1950's*"⁶

Mr. McCoy is candid as regards his leftist, liberal political orientation; he writes that after returning from France, "I was back in New Haven at a street demonstration for Black Panther leader Bobby Seale, where I met the beat-generation poet Allen Ginsberg. Over

*coffee at the bus station, he spun out a dark poetic version of CIA involvement in the Southeast Asian heroin trade, one that he recorded a few months later in a wryly angry poem, CIA Dope Calypso.*⁷ Mr. Ginsberg's poem is quoted in the 1972 book *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia*; it contains a derogatory reference to Air America transporting drugs for Vietnamese President Thieu. Mr. McCoy states that he was anxious to locate "*an Australian named John Everingham, [who] was writing about CIA helicopters carrying opium in Laos.*"⁸ It is evident that Mr. McCoy, even before he commenced to write *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia*, was predisposed to believe that the CIA and Air America were guilty of participation in the drug trade. Mr. McCoy's mind-set in 1971 is not surprising. He had just completed his Masters degree, (1968-1969) at the University of California at Berkeley⁹. The University of California at Berkeley was a mecca for liberal anti-war protestors, hippies and the like during the Vietnam War years.

In the Preface to the 2003 revised edition of his book, Mr. McCoy describes the methodology he used to write the original version: "*I started for Southeast Asia in the summer of 1971. On the way I stopped in Washington, D.C. to interview the legendary CIA operative Edward Lansdale...both Lansdale and his former CIA aide Lucien Conein received me in their modest suburban homes and told me stories about drug trafficking in Saigon by the French, the Corsicans, and intimates of President Ngo Dinh Diem.*"¹⁰ McCoy arrived at Tan Son Nhut airport in July, 1971 and spent two weeks in Saigon after which he flew to Vientiane, Laos where he located the Australian, John Everingham. Together they traveled by taxi and truck rides to a "*Yao hill tribe village near the peak of a mile-high mountain. After a few days spent watching the women plant opium in the valleys around the village, we trekked north ... to Long Pot village, a Hmong settlement at the edge of the air war that spread east to the Plain of Jars.... Over the next five days, we conducted our opium survey, door-to-door, at every house in the village. Do you grow opium? Yes. After the harvest, how do you market the opium? We take it over that hill, the farmers replied, and the American helicopters come with Hmong soldiers who buy the opium and take it away in the helicopters to Long Tieng.*"¹¹

The interviews conducted by Mr. McCoy and John Everingham at Long Pot were by means of a young Lao interpreter. The answers Mr. McCoy ascribes to the villagers were actually those given to him by his interpreter, meaning he was receiving the information 'second hand'. Furthermore, those of us who have lived in Asia for extended periods of time are aware that Asians, to be polite, often tell a visiting Caucasian what they think he wants to hear. Mr. McCoy writes that while at Long Pot he observed "*a helicopter marked "Air America" take off from Long Pot. He does not assert that the helicopter transported opium.*

McCoy was subsequently invited by Edgar 'Pop' Buell to join him on an Air America helicopter flight to visit Sam Thong.¹² This occasion is the only direct involvement Mr. McCoy had with Air America during his brief sojourn in Laos. Again, he does not assert that the Air America helicopter on which he rode with Pop Buell carried drugs.

After approximately sixteen days in Laos, Mr. McCoy wrote: “*By now I was certain that the CIA’s Air America was transporting opium for its Hmong hill tribe allies.*”¹³ Mr. McCoy provides no corroboration or factual data to support this unfounded allegation.

Based on the dates and time durations provided in the Preface to the 2003 edition of his book, it appears that Mr. McCoy spent approximately one month in Laos. He continued his travels to northern Thailand, Rangoon and Singapore, returning to his classes at Yale at the end of September, 1971, three months after he initially departed for France.

Back at Yale Mr. McCoy began to write *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia*. The fledgling author concedes that he “*had never written a book before. In fact I had never written anything longer than a term paper.*”¹⁴ Such are the qualifications of the author of the book that subsequently has been praised as “*a classic work*”¹⁵

At the time of the publication of *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia* the CIA’s General Counsel, Lawrence R. Houston wrote to Harper & Row the book’s publishers. Mr. Houston stated, “*We believe we could demonstrate to you that a considerable number of Mr. McCoy’s claims about this agency’s alleged involvement are totally false and without foundation, a number are distorted beyond recognition and none is based on convincing evidence.*”¹⁶

It appears from his own statements that Mr. McCoy was convinced of the CIA’s involvement in the drug trade before he left the United States. He traveled to Southeast Asia to find evidence that supported this predisposition; thus reversing the accepted scholarly practice of first gathering data, analyzing the data, and then forming a conclusion. Mr. McCoy reached the conclusion first and then sought data that would support his predetermined supposition.

The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia begins with chapters describing the role of the Sicilian Mafia and the significance of heroin laboratories in Marseilles. The author articulates the French and British colonial policies that encouraged the cultivation of opium. The core of the book is contained in four chapters that deal with the Cold War, South Vietnam, Heroin traffic in Hong Kong and the significance of the Golden Triangle. Civil Air Transport is mentioned four times, primarily having to do with CAT’s transport of former KMT soldiers from Southeast Asia to Taiwan, e.g. “*CAT flew another forty-five hundred KMT troops to Taiwan.*”¹⁷

The author refers to Air America twenty one times; the most serious allegations of drug trafficking appear in two consecutive paragraphs on page 263. Mr. McCoy writes, “*Without air transport for their opium, the Meo faced economic ruin. There was simply no form of air transport available in northern Laos except the CIA’s charter airline, Air America. And according to several sources, Air America began flying opium from mountain villages north and east of the Plain of Jars to Gen. Vang Pao’s headquarters at Long Tieng.*”⁷⁰ The author’s endnote number 70 states: “*Interview with Gen. Ouane Rattikone, Vientiane, Laos, September 1, 1971; interview with Gen. Thao Ma, Bangkok, Thailand, September 17, 1971; Don A. Schanche, Mister Pop (New York: David McKay Company, 1970), pp. 240-245.*”

In the next paragraph on page 263 the author continues, “*Air America was known to be flying Meo opium as late as 1971. Meo village leaders in the area west of the Plain of Jars, for example, claim that their 1970 and 1971 opium harvests were bought up by Vang Pao’s officers and flown to Long Tieng on Air America UH-1H helicopters ...71.*”

The corroboration for Mr. McCoy’s allegations that Air America was involved in the drug trade is contained in the evidence presented in endnotes numbers 70 and 71. Endnote 70 relies on verbal information given in one day interviews by two Royal Lao Army generals, both of dubious integrity. General Ouane Rattikone admitted to McCoy that he bought and sold opium for profit and *used rented C-47’s from the civil aviation companies and then dropped the opium into the Gulf of Siam.*¹⁸ General Thao Ma was forced to flee to Thailand after the failure of his coup d’état against the Royal Lao government.¹⁹ Mr. McCoy also cites Don A. Schanche’s book, *Mister Pop* pp. 240-245 to support his allegation that Air America engaged in drug trafficking. Mr. Schanche wrote: “*The CIA apparently encouraged Lao opium farmers to resume their old business and, since there simply is no other form of transportation in northeast Laos, arranged to help them fly it out. Unfortunately, one can only speculate about this* [Emphasis added by reviewer] *since like all its other activities in Laos and elsewhere the CIA’s role in Lao opium smuggling, whatever it is, is a secret neither the agency nor the Lao traders who presumably work at both ends of the chain will talk about.*”²⁰

Mr. McCoy’s endnote number 71 states: “*The authors visited Long Pot village in the region west of the Plain of Jars in August 1971 and interviewed local officials, opium farmers, and soldiers who confirmed Air America’s role in the local opium trade.*” The author spent five days in a single village, one of hundreds in Laos. He did not observe Air America engaged in the transport of opium.

In the final analysis the corroboration of Mr. McCoy’s allegation that Air America participated in the drug trade in Laos comes down to the contention of two Royal Lao Army generals and a five day visit to one village, a visit in which the author did not observe Air America transporting drugs.

Mr. McCoy admits that “... *American officials in Laos vigorously deny that either Vang Pao or Air America are in any way involved*” in the drug trade. However, this callow graduate student from Yale dismisses the denial as “*pious assertions.*”²¹ Mr. McCoy seems to have created a faulty syllogism as follows:

Opium is grown and exported from Laos,
The CIA is involved in a Secret War in Laos,
Therefore: The CIA is a participant in the opium trade

The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia contains no reference to the author’s having interviewed anyone associated with Air America; not a pilot, not a mechanic, not a manager – he spoke with no one from Air America.

The revised edition of *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia*, published in 1972 is entitled, *The Politics of Heroin: CIA complicity in the global drug trade, Afghanistan, Southeast Asia, Central America, Columbia* and was published in 2003. This latter book contains added text, not included in the 1972 version. Mr. McCoy makes some stunning charges in the 2003 book. He states. "...the Hmong had no real interest in winning the war."²² And he compares the Central Intelligence Agency with the Gestapo, "But both [CIA] divisions, Europe and Far East, were driven by the same radical pragmatism that allied the OPC [CIA Office of Policy Coordination] with Gestapo officers or Corsican gangsters in Western Europe and opium warlords in Southeast Asia."²³ Mr. McCoy's virulent antipathy towards the Central Intelligence Agency borders on the irrational. As a consequence his books, which begin as serious history, devolve into a polemic against the CIA.

Conclusions

- Both *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia*. Copyright 1972 and *The Politics of Heroin: CIA complicity in the global drug trade, Afghanistan, Southeast Asia, Central America, Columbia*. Copyright 2003, lack intellectual honesty and objectivity,
- The allegations cited in these books that Air America knowingly engaged in drug trafficking are false,
- At the conclusion of *The Politics of Heroin: CIA complicity in the global drug trade, Afghanistan, Southeast Asia, Central America, Columbia*. Copyright 2003; notwithstanding his repeated assertions to the contrary; Mr. McCoy acknowledges that the Church Committee of the United States Senate concluded that there was "no substance" to "allegations that the Agency's proprietaries [Civil Air Transport and Air America] were involved in drug trafficking."²⁴

Those of us who were employed by Air America in Asia know what we did and we take pride in those accomplishments. We also know what we did not do.

¹ CIA-assisted plot to overthrow Laos government foiled; former Air America/CIA asset Vang Pao arrested. By Larry Chin dated June 7, 2007. San Francisco Chronicle.

² BBC News, Asia-Pacific. Article by Penny Spiller dated June 11, 2007.

³ *The Politics of Heroin: CIA complicity in the global drug trade, Afghanistan, Southeast Asia, Central America, Columbia*. Copyright 2003 by Alfred W. McCoy, page 710.

⁴ *The Politics of Heroin: CIA complicity in the global drug trade, Afghanistan, Southeast Asia, Central America, Columbia*. Copyright 2003 by Alfred W. McCoy, page ix.

⁵ *The Politics of Heroin: CIA complicity in the global drug trade, Afghanistan, Southeast Asia, Central America, Columbia*. Copyright 2003 by Alfred W. McCoy, page ix.

⁶ *The Politics of Heroin: CIA complicity in the global drug trade, Afghanistan, Southeast Asia, Central America, Columbia.* Copyright 2003 by Alfred W. McCoy, page ix.

⁷ *The Politics of Heroin: CIA complicity in the global drug trade, Afghanistan, Southeast Asia, Central America, Columbia.* Copyright 2003 by Alfred W. McCoy, page x.

⁸ *The Politics of Heroin: CIA complicity in the global drug trade, Afghanistan, Southeast Asia, Central America, Columbia.* Copyright 2003 by Alfred W. McCoy, page xi.

⁹ Mr. McCoy's complete resume is posted on the University of Wisconsin's website:
http://history.wisc.edu/people/faculty/cv/mccoy_cv.pdf.

¹⁰ *The Politics of Heroin: CIA complicity in the global drug trade, Afghanistan, Southeast Asia, Central America, Columbia.* Copyright 2003 by Alfred W. McCoy, page xi.

¹¹ *The Politics of Heroin: CIA complicity in the global drug trade, Afghanistan, Southeast Asia, Central America, Columbia.* Copyright 2003 by Alfred W. McCoy, page xv.

¹² *The Politics of Heroin: CIA complicity in the global drug trade, Afghanistan, Southeast Asia, Central America, Columbia.* Copyright 2003 by Alfred W. McCoy, page xvi.

¹³ *The Politics of Heroin: CIA complicity in the global drug trade, Afghanistan, Southeast Asia, Central America, Columbia.* Copyright 2003 by Alfred W. McCoy, page xvi.

¹⁴ *The Politics of Heroin: CIA complicity in the global drug trade, Afghanistan, Southeast Asia, Central America, Columbia.* Copyright 2003 by Alfred W. McCoy, page xix.

¹⁵ *The Politics of Heroin: CIA complicity in the global drug trade, Afghanistan, Southeast Asia, Central America, Columbia.* Copyright 2003 by Alfred W. McCoy, page 710.

¹⁶ Quoted in a New York Times news article by Seymour M. Hersh dated July 22, 1972.

¹⁷ *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia* Copyright 1972 by Alfred W. McCoy with Cathleen B. Read and Leonard P. Adams II, pg. 134.

¹⁸ *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia* Copyright 1972 by Alfred W. McCoy with Cathleen B. Read and Leonard P. Adams II, pg. 260.

¹⁹ *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia* Copyright 1972 by Alfred W. McCoy with Cathleen B. Read and Leonard P. Adams II, pg. 295.

²⁰ Don A. Schanche, *Mister Pop* (New York: David McKay Company, 1970), pg. 244.

²¹ *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia* Copyright 1972 by Alfred W. McCoy with Cathleen B. Read and Leonard P. Adams II, pg. 281.

²² *The Politics of Heroin: CIA complicity in the global drug trade, Afghanistan, Southeast Asia, Central America, Columbia.* Copyright 2003 by Alfred W. McCoy, page 289

²³ *The Politics of Heroin: CIA complicity in the global drug trade, Afghanistan, Southeast Asia, Central America, Columbia.* Copyright 2003 by Alfred W. McCoy, page 167.

²⁴ *The Politics of Heroin: CIA complicity in the global drug trade, Afghanistan, Southeast Asia, Central*

America, Columbia. Copyright 2003 by Alfred W. McCoy, page 386. Also see the Church Committee's Final Report, Book I, Section XI, pg. 205.

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