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**Kathleen J. Frydl. *The Drug Wars in America, 1940-1973*.** New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. ISBN: 9781107013902 (hardback, \$99.00); 9781107697003 (paperback, \$34.99).

**Suzanna Reiss. *We Sell Drugs: The Alchemy of U.S. Empire*.** Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014. ISBN: 9780520280786 (paperback, \$29.95).

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**Essay by Aileen Teague, Vanderbilt University**

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### *The International Impact of America's War on Drugs*

With every passing decade, it is clear that an end to the United States' 'war on drugs' is nowhere in sight. Citizens both inside and outside of the U.S. endure the myriad political, diplomatic, and social repercussions of drug-control policies. This stalemate of sorts has affected historical scholarship in recent years, prompting historians in a number of subfields to utilize new and different approaches to understand the origins of modern drug control regimes. They have done so by looking at understudied but critical developmental periods in drug control, incorporating commodities studies and public health narratives into their works, and exploring cultures of drug stigmatization in the U.S. and abroad. Kathleen Frydl's *The Drug Wars in America, 1940-1973* and Suzanna Reiss's *We Sell Drugs: The Alchemy of U.S. Empire* draw on some of these insights, but they also advocate another unique approach that should be of great interest to scholars of international affairs and American empire: placing the narrative of twentieth-century drug control within the context of U.S. power. Although concerned with different elements of the U.S. drug control regime—Frydl is interested in government institutions and the shift from a tax-regulated to a punitive drug control system while Reiss focuses on 'drug control imperialism' and the benefits it secured for U.S. pharmaceutical companies—both scholars locate the failures of drug control policy in the aggrandizement of American power. In doing so, their studies raise a number of questions and open up space for narratives not yet realized in the history of drug control. Both works also make a strong case for why those seeking to understand the full spectrum of U.S. power abroad should pay more attention to the origins, justifications, and implications of U.S.-led international drug control policies.

Over the past four decades, a number of works in the areas of drug policy studies, criminal punishment, and social control affirm that the handling of narcotics changed over the course of the twentieth century from a regulatory illicit regime to a prohibitive, punitive one.<sup>1</sup> What sets Frydl's *The Drug Wars in America* apart is that it specifically grapples with the question of how and why the federal government put this shift into effect (3). She argues that a "militant drug war has served as a mechanism by which the U.S. government reallocated functions, forged alliances, and challenged resources" in order to "enhance and legitimize its sovereign power" (12). By examining how various government institutions handled the drug threat, Frydl correlates the origins of criminalized drug control policies with the strict management of state power that accompanied America's "global ascendancy abroad" (1). This approach enables her to make two important contributions. First, through the lens of institutions, President Richard Nixon's infamous declaration of a 'war on drugs' in 1971, a commonly cited turning point in U.S. drug control policies, is seen only as publicizing changes that had taken place nearly two decades prior. Second, her state-centered analysis brings to light topics that are normally presented as separate entities; for example, the regulation of licit substances (e.g. addictive synthetics) is analyzed alongside that of illicit substances (e.g. opiates, cocaine) (2-3).

Frydl's account spans six chapters. The first three chapters establish how authorities (and by implication, the American people) came to understand that narcotics use led to crime. The heart of the study, however, examines how this notion influenced policies and laws. While Frydl examines a number of governmental institutions involved in drug policy enforcement—the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), police forces, the Customs Bureau, etc.—the protagonist of the work is the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (FBN). Established in 1930 under the Department of Treasury, the FBN later reorganized as the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs (BNDD) under the Department of Justice in 1968. Harry J. Anslinger led the FBN for much of this period. According to Frydl, the postwar period saw the infamous commissioner facilitating an unprecedented level of international engagement in the name of drug control. In the years following, Anslinger succeeded in depicting the illicit drug trade as controlled by an "evil cabal," which ultimately worked to reinforce the importance of the FBN and justify its increasing levels of power over other U.S. institutions (61).

Later chapters illustrate how confused an affair drug control became by the 1950s and early 1960s, as American society debated what constituted a licit or an illicit substance. Because withdrawal symptoms and the user base of amphetamines and barbiturates

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<sup>1</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010); Eva Bertram, et al., *Drug War Politics: The Price of Denial*; David T. Courtwright, *Forces of Habit: Drugs and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); David Garland, *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Rufus King, *The Drug Hang-Up: America's Fifty-year Folly* (New York, Norton, 1972); David F. Musto, *The American Disease: Origins of Narcotic Control*. 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

(middle to upper class whites) differed from the average illicit drug user (inner city, low income-minorities), enforcement and regulation tactics evolved rather ambiguously. Frydl highlights the FDA's aggressive plans to control addictive synthetics as a means of participating in drug control, while at the same time the FBN tried to consolidate its power. With the enactment of minimum drug sentencing laws, police forces would also negotiate their willingness to enforce drug laws (153-154). *The Drug Wars in America* ends with the BNDD forming under the Department of Justice in 1968 and the promulgation of the Controlled Substances Act of 1970, which put into practice many of the drug laws we know today. Throughout the 1960s, despite a number of actors articulating policy alternatives to criminalized drug control (e.g. the treatment approach), punitive drug policies prevailed. According to Frydl, the shift from a tax-regulated to a punitive drug control system, packaged under the 'war on drugs' after 1971, came with the implicit understanding that U.S. government and corporate leaders could utilize the system to consolidate power and control unruly populations. Citizens both inside and outside of the U.S. continue to live with the consequences.

Reiss also sees the postwar period as critical to the development of U.S.-led international drug control policies. She focuses on drug control in the context of postwar economic power, specifically in the rise to global dominance of U.S. pharmaceutical companies. Tracing the development of the U.S. drug-manufacturing industry, *We Sell Drugs* argues that by "selectively regulating" drug production and consumption at home and abroad via developing drug control measures, the U.S. achieved dominance in the overseas drug commodities market (11). She explains that the U.S. government allowed the marketing of some drugs—Reiss focuses on U.S. control of Andean coca plant production—because they enhanced the U.S. pharmaceutical industry, while other drugs that did not advance U.S. economic interests were regulated and policed (11). Two U.S. pharmaceutical companies, Merck & Co., Inc., and Maywood Chemical Works, and the Coca Cola Company, which used the coca plant as part of its flavoring agent, depended on this government-facilitated arrangement. The tragedy was, as Reiss points out, that the arrangement disproportionately burdened indigenous communities in the Andean coca-growing regions, as well as poor, racialized minorities living in U.S. cities (9). Perhaps the greatest irony is that the U.S. dominated the drug raw materials market in countries like Peru and Bolivia at the same time as it invested substantial resources in controlling the global market for finished goods such as cocaine. In this way Reiss illuminates a tenuous line between licit and illicit drug consumption, a line constructed by U.S. authority figures and corporate actors. The tension between the licit and the illicit that pervades her analysis of one mode of U.S. economic imperialism is perhaps the work's most novel contribution.

Reiss develops her argument over five chapters, the first of which examines how the U.S. entered the market for manufactured drugs and how this access shaped interactions with coca-producing nations (17). The pairing of war mobilization (i.e. pharmaceuticals for the war effort) with a U.S. desire to control the market paved the way for the U.S. pharmaceutical industry's eventual dominance. In the late 1940s and into the 1950s, the U.S. government participated in the coca distribution circuit on behalf of drug manufacturing companies. Reiss argues that notions of the 'illicit' in drug

control developed out of a “government-corporate” regulatory alliance (57). The FBN navigated the line between the licit and illicit freely. According to the study, Anslinger and his lieutenants believed that the only way to secure the safe handling of drugs and combat illicit drug trafficking was to establish a U.S. monopoly over narcotic drugs in close collaboration with the drug manufacturing industry (57-58). The U.S. could utilize international organizations such as the United Nations to influence coca plant production for its own economic benefit. Reiss is quick to point out, however, that U.S. regulation of narcotics did not prevent surpluses of drug raw materials or finished goods from entering the illicit market (65).

Considerable attention is devoted to the anxieties of the companies that had the most at stake in the coca commodities trade, as the FBN secured their access to raw materials at the same time it constructed increasingly repressive drug policies domestically and abroad. Reiss examines the process of chemical transformation of drug raw materials as they were converted into finished goods such as synthetic drugs and cocaine (133). The conversion process, Reiss contends, had many implications, and itself could push a finished good towards being labeled legal or illegal. Coca-Cola, for example, feared being pushed out of the market altogether. But the company’s impressive growth at midcentury ensured the U.S. would continue as the largest importer of the coca plant. The work concludes with an analysis of how U.S. officials’ enforcement of drug policies bled into larger efforts to preserve economic control of the drug raw materials market at the same it sought to quell international and domestic challenges to U.S. power during the Cold War.

Both studies advance important notions about the role of U.S. government in administering increasingly repressive drug control policies that ultimately worked to its benefit. That a punitive drug control regime is valuable for more reasons than simply controlling substances deemed illicit also resonates forcefully when examining drug control through the lens of U.S. power. Nevertheless, the limitations of an approach rooted in U.S. power are worth exploring, as are the implications of these limitations for future studies. An exclusive focus on the U.S. drug control regime and its motives, for instance, neglects local experiences with drug control and the history of stigmatization abroad of some drugs. Mexico is one case in which a U.S. state-centered analysis tends to fall short. Marijuana regulations in Mexico, a producer of both the cannabis and the poppy plants, were at times stricter than those in the U.S. Mexico outlawed marijuana in 1920, 17 years before the U.S. placed its first tax restriction on the weed via the Marijuana Tax Act of 1937. In his recent work, historian Isaac Campos even goes so far as to suggest that many of these stigmatizing ideas against marijuana in Mexico influenced those in the U.S.<sup>2</sup> Campos’s study is one reminder that students of drug policy must temper analyses of governmental controls and power with those—some yet to be produced—of local and non-U.S. policies and traditions with certain drugs. Along these lines, Reiss’s study could have benefited from more of an analysis of

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<sup>2</sup> Isaac Campos, *Homegrown: Marijuana and the Origins of Mexico’s War on Drugs* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

who won in Andean societies as a result of a U.S.-led drug control regime. Such an analysis would have rounded out the economic hierarchy she so deftly examines in her work. Inside the U.S., Frydl does provide case studies of various (sometimes very corrupt) local actors who benefited from the developing punitive drug control system. The geographically dispersed nature of these case studies across time, however, sometimes takes away from their explanatory power, and the border region is given very little attention.

These limitations aside, both works suggest a number of possibilities for future study. Frydl's look at institutions—especially her focus on local police forces—raises a number of questions about the evolution of what she calls “street level drug enforcement” in relation to the creation of top-level drug policy. What rituals surround U.S. and foreign cultures of drug policing and how can scholars better understand the failures in drug control through the lens of police autonomy? Moreover, Reiss's incorporation of insights from U.S. imperial history is a tool that could be utilized in drug-history analyses focused on other parts of the developing world. Does U.S. power exercised via drug-control measures vary based on location or commodity? What sorts of breaks and continuities can be identified in drug enforcement globally?

The most powerful aspect of both *The Drug Wars in America* and *We Sell Drugs* is that they generate a cause for reflection on the violent impacts a U.S. exercise of power via drug control has had domestically and overseas. The Drug Policy Alliance estimates the death toll in Mexico's drug war to be greater than 70,000, as drug-related violence continues to dominate headlines today. Lawyer and activist Michelle Alexander makes a convincing case for how the ‘war on drugs’ fuels mass incarceration, especially of minorities, in the U.S., often for first-time drug offenses.<sup>3</sup> But the U.S. drug control regime persists because actors at every level—local police, multi-billion dollar companies, policymakers, diplomats, etc.—are rewarded, often simply for the sheer number of people thrown in jail for drug-related offenses each year. Those operating at the international levels are given access into other countries' affairs, all in the name of a ‘war on drugs’ that cannot be won. What Frydl's and Reiss's studies ultimately provide, then, is valuable historical context in which to examine one way in which U.S. power is exercised abroad. And as the ‘war on drugs’ continues, and even takes on new dimensions, the origins and evolution of this narrative should be of increased interest to students and scholars of international affairs and American empire.

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<sup>3</sup> Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*.

school, Aileen served for four years as a U.S. Marine Corps officer, and continues to participate as a reservist.

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