

Imperial Ideologies: Media Hysteria, Racism, and the Addiction to the War on Drugs

A review essay by Stephen Hartnett, Loyola University Chicago and Ball State University

The Economic Anatomy of a Drug War: Criminal Justice in the Commons. By David W. Rasmussen and Bruce L. Benson. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994. 263 pp. \$22.95 (soft).

Cracked Coverage: Television News, the Anti-Cocaine Crusade, and the Reagan Legacy. By Jimmie L. Reeves and Richard Campbell. Durham: Duke University Press, 1994. 330 pp. \$59.95 (hard), \$19.95 (soft).

Deep Politics and the Death of JFK. By Peter Dale Scott. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. 413 pp. \$25.00 (hard).

"Just Say No to Drugs!" No, wait, "Just Do It!" These two media slogans mark the paradoxical extremes of a culture that is addicted to the consumption of glitzy commodities and prepackaged lifestyles, yet simultaneously obsessed with controlling the roles (of both producers and consumers) that signify upward mobility into the cherished social space of middle-class citizenship. The difference between these two media monsters, however, is that while "Just Do It!" may have seduced millions of Americans into needless expenditures and even deeper allegiance to the latest gaggle of posterboy athletic superstars, the campaign to "Just Say No to Drugs!" has obscured the fact that the "War on Drugs" has evolved into one of the most devastating political disasters of recent U.S. history. Indeed, initially launched in 1982 by the National Institute of Drug Abuse with then-First Lady Nancy Reagan as the campaign's star mouthpiece, the command to "Just Say No to Drugs" encapsulates one of the dominant New Right maneuvers of recent U.S. political history: It reduces the international political economy of global capitalism, a generation's worth of domestic urban decay, and the complex dialectic of consumption and class formation to the good old prehistory of personal, moral choice. The problem with this act of ahistorical metonymy, however, as a growing number of scholars (including those considered in this review) are slowly pointing out, is that the infamous

War on Drugs was not a response to an epidemic of drug consumption and drug-related violence, but, rather, the catalyst for these perceived threats to America's cultural and even national sovereignty.

Analyzing the War on Drugs is of interest to communication scholars for several reasons. First, as Reeves and Campbell make painfully evident in *Cracked Coverage*, the War on Drugs provides mass media scholars with a significant test case of how the major TV news media (ABC, NBC, and CBS) do not reflect or report important news stories, but, rather, determine which issues are elevated to the frenetic status of "crisis." Second, as Rasmussen and Benson demonstrate convincingly in *The Economic Anatomy of A Drug War*, the War on Drugs provides organizational communication scholars with an unsettling example of how the democratic and civic-oriented social purposes of state bureaucracies (in this case, the courts, the police, and Congress) may be hijacked by the self-reflexive institutional imperative to reproduce bureaucratic turf. Third, as Scott illustrates in his terrifying expose, *Deep Politics and the Death of JFK*, the War on Drugs provides organizational, media, and cultural studies scholars with an interlocking nexus of historical, cultural, and political questions (which, in this study, links the death of JFK to the "deep politics" underworld of U.S.-sponsored anticommunist-narcotics activities) that demands the production of interdisciplinary analysis.

The thematic and historical thread linking these three studies is their shared belief that the War on Drugs—whether approached as an unfortunate example of media hysteria, bungled bureaucratic catastrophe, or "deep-political" nightmare—represents not only a repetition of racist and imperialist ideologies, but a significant challenge to the fundamental promises and principles of modern democracy. I begin with detailed discussions of *Cracked Coverage* and *The Economic Anatomy of A Drug War*—as these two studies clearly employ more traditional communication studies methodologies—before concluding with a brief analysis of *Deep Politics and the Death of JFK*.

Reeves and Campbell's critique of the major TV news programs' role in producing what they call the "seismic hysteria" (p. 162) of the War on Drugs is based on an analysis of the 270 news stories aired by ABC, CBS, and NBC between 1981 and 1988. The authors begin with a brief introductory chapter sprinkled with references to both communication scholars (including, primarily, James Carey and Stuart Hall) and critical theorists (including, primarily, Mikhail Bakhtin and Michel Foucault) who have influenced their study. Many readers may simply decide to skip this section. However, for communication scholars using *Cracked Coverage* in the classroom, these introductory passages will prove extremely helpful as examples of how to integrate cutting-edge critical theory and communication studies work into coherent strategies of interdisciplinary cultural analysis. Of the four chapters that comprise the general introductory materials of part 1, chapter 4, "Reaganism: The Packaging of Backlash Politics," stands out as a particularly useful example of how communication studies benefit from engaging in historical contextualization. Indeed, here Reeves and Campbell situate the War on Drugs as a crucial disciplinary discourse within the nostalgia-driven New Right-Religious Right-Reaganism back-

lash, which they summarize as an “antifeminist” (p. 75) and “anti-social welfare” (p. 76) response—fueled by sexist and racist stereotypes—to the jarring socioeconomic dislocations following the collapse of Fordism. Hence, Reeves and Campbell argue that

as an orthodoxy of inclusion, Reaganism promised to take all America back to the gilded age of a pre-Fordist, Horatio Alger enterprise culture; on the other hand, as an orthodoxy of exclusion, it promised to take America back from the color- and gender-coded “special interest groups” of the Keynesian welfare state. (p. 90)

Having thus established the historical and cultural context of the War on Drugs in part 1, Reeves and Campbell then move, in part 2, “Interrogating the Cocaine Narrative,” into their more detailed media analyses. Here their methodical cataloging and critiquing of the major TV news coverage of the War on Drugs provides stellar results: Specifically, they demonstrate convincingly that America’s fear of drugs—initially hyped by the “Just Say No” campaign—did not reach frenzied proportions until the major media engaged in an intense period of saturation coverage. The basic chronology of events, as detailed by Reeves and Campbell, is worth reconstructing here in some detail:

1. November 29, 1985, the *New York Times* prints its first front-page crack story.
2. December 1, 1985, NBC airs the first major TV news report on crack.
3. April 1986, in a *New York Times*-CBS poll, 2% of respondents pick drugs as “the nation’s most important problem” (p. 162).
4. Between March and December, 1986, the major media sources begin their saturation coverage of the drug problem with CBS airing 49 stories, NBC airing 46 stories, and ABC airing 34 stories; the *New York Times* prints 139 stories, the *Washington Post* prints 60 stories, and the *Los Angeles Times* prints 38 stories.
5. September 1986, after 7 months of intense media coverage of the War on Drugs, a *New York Times*-CBS poll shows that “80% of those responding believed that America was caught up in a national drug crisis. In the same poll, however, 62% also reported that drugs were not a problem in their home town” (p. 163).

The thesis of this chronological overview is that the rapid escalation of drugs as “America’s number one problem” was not a genuine, grassroots response by the public to the real-life conditions of everyday existence, but, rather, the result of a relentlessly sensationalist media barrage. The obvious questions, then, are “who built this seismic hysteria? how was it constructed? and why was it so successful in capturing the public’s imagination?” The answers *Cracked Coverage* provides to these questions demonstrate three particularly cogent examples of the dubious genealogy of much of the “news” employed in the construction of what Reeves and Campbell refer to throughout their study as “the cocaine narrative.”

The first example involves a Summit, New Jersey, drug hotline, 1-800-COCAINE, which first gained national attention on CBS, May 10, 1983, where it

was presented as an example of the explosion of patient-customer services in an increasingly drug-using culture. Reeves and Campbell note, however, that the 1-800-COCAINE hotline was "sponsored by a medical consortium interested in identifying potential candidates with health insurance for expensive treatment programs" (p. 122). Furthermore, they cite sources who argue that the numbers of calls to the hotline nearly doubled whenever the major nightly news shows discussed cocaine, thus demonstrating "a model for direct response healthcare marketing that mixes public service with revenue generation" (p. 122)—that is, inflating the "news" narrative of a rising cocaine nation makes nifty business sense for the drug therapy industry. Reeves and Campbell accordingly conclude that the 1-800-COCAINE example demonstrates how the cocaine narrative was essentially defined by entities "whose very existence depended on the production and reproduction of drug delinquency" (p. 123).

The second significant example of how the cocaine narrative was constructed, and by whom, is situated within Reeves and Campbell's argument that the escalation of the cocaine narrative from its "phase one" theme (which presents coke as the drug of choice of morally deluded rich whites) into its "phase two" theme (which presents coke—and, increasingly, crack—as the drug of choice of socially dysfunctional poor blacks) was accomplished primarily through (a) the discovery of the infamous "crack house" and (b) a corresponding shift in "crack house" reportorial style. This important shift in both reportorial style and subject matter is most evident in the practice of flak-jacketed reporters accompanying heavily armed police teams on dramatic busts of crack houses. Reeves and Campbell label this new reportorial style "raiding footage" (p. 134) and argue that it "represents nothing less than the convergence of the reportorial outlook with the policing point of view" (p. 135). Indeed, the authors note that while such raiding footage occurs in less than 25% of phase one news coverage, it dominates phase two coverage by appearing in over 50% of all drug-related stories. Reeves and Campbell even tell the pathetic story of how Los Angeles Police Chief Daryl Gates staged one such TV-Police raid with "Just Say No" spokesperson Nancy Reagan tagging along in a Los Angeles Police Department windbreaker (pp. 135–136). The point here is that the cocaine narrative is by this time, circa 1987, being presented to the TV-news-consuming public via perspectives determined by police forces; thus, the War on Drugs appears increasingly as a televisual military effort to eradicate predominantly urban Black undesirables.

The third significant example of how the cocaine narrative was constructed by TV news coverage involves Reeves and Campbell's thesis that the somber, fatalistic, postcrisis tone of "phase three" of the cocaine narrative ("Denouement," p. 219) was produced in great part by the horrified yet patronizing discourse surrounding (primarily Black) delinquent mothers and their "crack babies." The problem with this media image, however, as the authors demonstrate via numerous references to medical journals, is that while crack babies were being portrayed as the heart wrenching signal of the final gruesome assault of drugs on our national future, there is no scientific evidence that details the long-term effects of exposure to crack on fetuses (thus, while

informed discussion of child care obviously espouses drug-free mothers, the point here is that the crack baby image resonated with a crushing sense of social decline and perversion that did not correspond to the actual medical and social parameters of the problem). On the other hand, there is much medical and scientific evidence detailing the connections between healthy babies and the availability of prenatal health care—including safe housing, healthy diet, and access to medical treatment for young mothers—yet the major media fastidiously ignored the fact that access to each of these important family health factors was dramatically cut back during the Reagan backlash. Reeves and Campbell argue, then, that the media's hysterical focus on crack babies allowed the Reagan administration to deflect debate regarding the long-term impact of its economic and health policies by simplifying and personalizing the catastrophe of a collapsing health care system in the readily identifiable trope of the irresponsible Black woman. Thus, the hapless mothers of crack babies become catchall signifiers that, via their convergence with preexisting race and gender stereotypes, reframe the context of debate from historical, structural, politico-economic questions, to ahistorical, personal, moral decisions. Reeves and Campbell support this section of their analysis with an excellent survey of various feminist critiques of Reagan's profamily rhetoric, and conclude that the supposed epidemic of crack babies and their crazed, irresponsible mothers signals the final stage of the media's sensational construction of what they call "a cycle of othering" (p. 214).

As each of the three examples discussed above demonstrates, the cocaine narrative was essentially a televisual fantasy that produced new twists on existing race and gender stereotypes while vigorously avoiding both historical perspectives and critical analyses of the sociocultural forces lurking beneath the War on Drugs. Indeed, as *Cracked Coverage* makes painfully evident in page after page of insightful debunking, the New Right-Religious Right-Reagan War on Drugs served the reductionist function of "defining *social problems* grounded on global transformations in late capitalism as *individual moral problems*" (p. 38). The one obvious weakness of *Cracked Coverage* is that by focusing exclusively on the media's role in supporting the agenda of the New Right, the text leaps over the question of how the War on Drugs was actually conceived and promoted within the bureaucracies charged with fighting the battle. Addressing this issue brings me to Rasmussen and Benson's *The Economic Anatomy of A Drug War*, which, because it was originally undertaken as a report for the Florida Legislature, provides an in-depth look at the inner, bureaucratic workings of the institutions responsible for fighting the War on Drugs. The subtitle of this study, "Criminal Justice in the Commons," holds the key to understanding Rasmussen and Benson's critique of the War on Drugs. Put simply, the U.S. prison system (both state and federal) is run on a commons basis, meaning that police, legal professionals, and elected politicians are not held accountable for the management of the prison system, which instead is held as a commons to which all the concerned parties have equal access. One of the central theses of this study, then, is that the "commons aspect of the prison system provides convenient cover for prosecutors, judges, and legis-

lators who can concoct politically popular policies that undermine the efficient use of prison resources" (p. 195).

As proof of this apparently incendiary claim, Rasmussen and Benson offer three clear examples of how the War on Drugs has achieved precisely the opposite of its stated purposes. First, making more drug busts (in Florida) has actually lowered the amount of time offenders serve behind bars; specifically, because "prison admissions for drugs rose 875.4% between FY 1983/84 and FY 1989/90" (p. 22), prison officials, in order to adjust the number of inmates they could fit in their already overcrowded prisons, were forced to lower the average percentage of time served on drug charges from "52.8% in 1987 to 33% in 1989. In fact, about 37% of the prisoners released in December 1989 had served less than 25% of their sentence, and some served less than 15%" (p. 23). Organizational communication scholars will obviously be fascinated by this point, for it demonstrates that the "get tough on crime" agenda of politicians, when refracted through the institutional realities of limited state budgets and prison space, in fact results in shorter sentences for prisoners. Thus, the War on Drugs stands as a glaring example of how organizational miscommunication between various branches of the government produces the opposite effect of what was promised by grandstanding politicians.

A second remarkable example of how the War on Drugs has gone so horribly wrong pertains to the effects increased drug busts have on prisons themselves. Basing their research on publications from the Illinois Department of Corrections, Rasmussen and Benson show that prison overcrowding, one of the most obvious results of accelerated drug-related arrests, leads to dramatically more violent prisons. For example, "when the daily populations of Graham and Centralia increased by 33% through double-celling, total disciplinary reports increased 63%, and assaults on staff increased by 120%" (p. 25). Because of the War on Drugs, then, prisons are not only less capable of fulfilling any kind of rehabilitative role, but are more likely to create violent offenders. Given the fact, noted above, that offenders now serve less time per crime than before the War on Drugs, it becomes obvious that one of the unintended results of the War on Drugs is that it contributes significantly to the production of a generation of young dispossessed men for whom prison is not a deterrent but, rather, a training ground in both violence and even greater disrespect for the authority of law. As a stunning corollary to this claim, Rasmussen and Benson cite Bureau of Justice Statistics research demonstrating that "half of the inmates who had ever used a major drug, and roughly three-fifths of those who used a major drug regularly, did not do so until after their first arrest for some non-drug crime" (p. 58). Thus Rasmussen and Benson conclude that "*crime leads to drug use, not vice versa*" (p. 58, emphasis added).

The third devastating example of how the War on Drugs has achieved results completely opposite those intended by politicians involves Rasmussen and Benson's argument that roughly the same capitalist forces that prompt product and marketing innovations in the "legal" economy structure the political economy of drugs. Thus, for example, interdiction efforts against marijuana, which previously was primarily an imported drug, have quite logically led to

both skyrocketing domestic production and the creation of plant variations that are more potent (thus meaning users need to smoke less to get the same effect, thereby lowering the amount of the drug producers need to grow, smuggle, buy, etc., hence making every participant's involvement with the drug more difficult to detect). For example, Rasmussen and Benson cite sources suggesting that "the average potency of marijuana increased by a factor of eight between 1974 and 1984, and methods currently exist which can increase the present average potency of marijuana by at least another five times" (p. 86). As a corollary to this argument, Rasmussen and Benson note that many casual marijuana consumers who find themselves deterred by the War on Drugs turn—again, quite logically—to alcohol. This makes strong economic sense, since alcohol is relatively price-equivalent with marijuana; however, as Rasmussen and Benson note, again based on Bureau of Justice Statistics findings, roughly twice as many convicted criminals commit their offenses while drunk (29.2%) than while stoned (15.4%), and roughly 10 times as many violent assaults are committed by drunk offenders (44.3%) than by stoned offenders (4.5%; p. 107). Hence, the War on Drugs leads to greater domestic production of marijuana, more potent marijuana, and, for those who switch from the illegal drug (marijuana) to its economically equivalent legal drug (alcohol), potentially *more violence and more crime*.

The pressing questions, then, based on these hard-hitting examples of how the War on Drugs is a complete failure are "who is behind the war, and why are they fighting it?" The answers provided in *Economic Anatomy of A Drug War* prompt nothing less than a total reevaluation of the U.S. court system and the management of police activities. Communication scholars concerned with analyses of the U.S. courts and the discourses of law, justice, and ethics, will therefore find the second half of *Economic Anatomy of A Drug War* (chapters 5–8) particularly relevant.

The story begins with what Rasmussen and Benson refer to as "entrepreneurial bureaucrats" (p. 120), and takes us to the congressional hearings on the Comprehensive Drug Penalty Act (June 23 and October 14, 1983), which sought to allow policing agencies direct access to assets seized in drug-related busts. Previous to this law, all assets seized in police actions reverted to the state and were administered from a central pool, but with this new law the police force responsible for the arrest could appropriate the assets seized in the arrest to supplement their budgets. Proponents of this law present at the hearings included the U.S. Customs Service, the U.S. Attorney's Office, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency, and various police department representatives; clearly, passage of the law (which occurred in November, 1988) was favored by those actors whose budgets would benefit from a revamped asset forfeiture law, particularly when it was noted that assets could be seized regardless of proof of criminality. For example, Rasmussen and Benson note that while the "Volusia County, Florida, Sheriff's Department seized over \$8 million (an average of \$5,000 per day) from motorists on Interstate 95 during a forty-one month period between 1989 and 1992" (p. 136), "*no criminal charges were filed in over 75% of these seizure cases*" (p. 137, italics added). Thus, the War

on Drugs was being waged against overwhelmingly innocent citizens primarily for the purpose of supplementing local enforcement agency budgets with assets seized—totaling over \$700 million in 1991 alone (p. 132)—under the new law.

The provocative argument of *Economic Anatomy of A Drug War*, then, is that the War on Drugs has functioned as both a public relations ploy by politicians (who benefit politically by appearing to support the backlash mantra to “get tough on crime”) and as a bureaucratic stratagem of policing agencies (who benefit financially via asset forfeitures), with the unfortunate consequence that the courts and prison systems have been swamped with numbers of cases and prisoners that the system simply cannot handle. For Rasmussen and Benson, the key to understanding the genesis of this crisis is that the entire prison-courts-policing system is managed on a commons basis, thus leaving no one accountable for the rational management of the state’s limited law and order-justice resources. The War on Drugs needs to be understood, then, from this perspective, as a politically motivated bureaucratic smoke screen engineered to obscure the larger crisis of the effective management of the state. Regardless of how one may feel about this thesis regarding the questionable origins and bureaucratic beneficiaries of the War on Drugs, Rasmussen and Benson’s research nonetheless argues convincingly that the War on Drugs—if allowed to continue unabated—can do little more than undermine whatever sense of decency and justice remains in U.S. democracy.

The one obvious flaw in *Economic Anatomy of A Drug War* is that Rasmussen and Benson’s model of analysis cannot account for systemic irrationality; specifically, given the fact that the War on Drugs has been widely recognized by most scholars as a complete failure, a need still exists for an explanatory model that can account for why the war has lasted so long. Indeed, it must be noted that while the circus-like media hype addressed in *Cracked Coverage* has appeared to give way to the next televisual fad, and while the controversial asset forfeiture laws discussed in *Economic Anatomy of A Drug War* have recently received intense scrutiny from lawmakers and justice officials, the War on Drugs is nevertheless escalating. At this point I turn to Peter Dale Scott’s stunning study, *Deep Politics and the Death of JFK*, for Scott demonstrates convincingly that the political economy of drugs and the attendant War on Drugs are both sanctioned by long-standing agreements between U.S. intelligence agencies, major U.S. transnational capitalist interests, and Third World contacts (both governmental and otherwise) who play central roles in the continued U.S. assault on “communism.” Scott’s text is therefore clearly not in the traditional genre of communication studies, yet his work is so thoroughly researched, so painstakingly detailed in its analysis, and so devastating in its debunking of accepted U.S. political myths that it should be of crucial interest to communication scholars concerned with the larger question of how supposedly public decisions and rational democratic discourse are consistently undermined by the interlocking interests of anticommunist intelligence agencies and transnational capitalism.

Scott begins by defining *parapolitics* as “a system or practice of politics

[referring chiefly, but not exclusively, to the world of intelligence agencies] in which accountability is consciously diminished" (p. 6). *Deep politics* is then defined as an attempt to expand this parapolitical analysis by "looking beneath public formulations of policy issues to the bureaucratic, economic, and ultimately covert and criminal activities which underlie them" (p. 10). Scott prudently notes that such deep-political analysis is not based on the uncovering of secret externally situated cabals of plotting overthrowers, but rather, in describing the labyrinthine political and economic connections that structure the internal framework of postwar American culture. Put simply, the deep-political agenda "breaks down the distinction between overt and covert power" (p. 17)—and it therefore offers communication scholars a vivid example of how to expand the genre of political communication analysis into previously uncharted territories, particularly in terms of explaining how decisions and programs that appear irrational (in terms of managing a democratic nation) may in fact satisfy the structural imperatives of key deep-political players.

Recounting the details of Scott's critique of the War on Drugs is almost impossible, as every page of his text is constructed with seemingly endless references to obscure government documents, recently released CIA and FBI memos, personal interviews, and Scott's own treasure chest of files (compiled in over 25 years of research on the topic); isolating any one passage for analysis entails removing it from the underlying implications and contextualizations of the stories that surround it, thus leaving the separated issue dangling in the unprotected realm of the unbelievable. Indeed, Scott's critique of the War on Drugs (which is thoroughly embedded in his analyses of the assassination of JFK, Iran-Contra, Watergate, and U.S.-Cuba-Latin American relations) entails a series of shocking analyses of accepted U.S. political myths that, quite simply, require all of the other analyses of the text for support; deep-political analysis therefore is not reducible to the kinds of neat summaries provided for the first two studies considered in this review. Suffice it to say then that *Deep Politics* is a remarkably impressive piece of political scholarship that communication scholars concerned with questions of public discourse, democratic practices, organizational communication, and political communication will find relentlessly complex and frustratingly dense, yet invaluable.

The problem, of course, as each of the studies considered in this essay demonstrates, is that complicated historical, cultural, media, and political-economic analyses cannot be reduced to readily digestible metonyms (crack houses = Black immorality, not urban decay; crack babies = parental irresponsibility, not health care crisis; and so on); thus, each of these important studies is likely to fall on the deaf ears of a public addicted to imperial ideologies and sensational media representations that satisfy its appetite for simplistic explanations and convenient scapegoats.