The ‘War’ on Drugs
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...this war of lies, hypocrisy, and self-interest, which, like the Vietnam War is being fought with no intention of winning. The war itself is a fraud.

(Michael Levine, ex-undercover agent: Levine, 1990)

In November 1989 President George Bush declared a ‘war’ on drugs and drug traffic. Many western governments followed suit and the UN set up its own International Drug Control Programme. There was therefore nothing covert about this operation. On the contrary, it was trumpeted from the rooftops. In what sense then does it warrant inclusion in a volume on lying? The above quote would put it in the realm of a ‘charade’: an elaborate campaign undertaken to give the appearance of tackling a problem. The policy itself and the claims made about it constitute the lie. This chapter will consider how far this interpretation is valid. As the case does not start with a denial, and the aim of the chapter is not to start by uncovering one, the structure will differ from others in the book. It will consider the nature of the policy proclaimed, which was only one of the strategy options available for tackling the problem, and discuss how the policy goal was affected by other agenda, and how implementation was affected by an earlier legacy of involvement of US agencies with drug trafficking.

The particular ‘Andean strategy’ that Bush’s Administration developed had these components: a US-led coalition with governments in the region that attempted to suppress the supply of drugs derived from coca into the US by interrupting it at source, by joint operations of US enforcement agencies with local police or military either by destroying crops in the fields, or by disrupting the first stages in the chain of marketing and refinement in the countries of origin, or those
that were crucial in the transit to the US. The announcement was followed almost immediately by dramatic action. In March 1990, 24,000 US combat troops invaded Panama and whisked away its President, General Manuel Noriega, to face charges in Miami of being a ‘drug lord’. More generally, there were major increases in budgets for military and police equipment and in training and other logistic and advisory support to certain Latin American governments. So too for the agencies that were to be charged with leading the war – the Drugs Enforcement Agency (DEA), naturally, but also the US Armed Services and the CIA.

This kind of campaign was presented as a praiseworthy effort to commit the necessary resources to attack at its roots what was becoming more and more seen as the national scourge. In a 1989 opinion poll, nearly two-thirds of American people considered drugs ‘as the most important problem facing the country’ (quoted in Scott and Marshall, 1991). But some critics suggest the campaigns are not directed at the most strategic targets. To put the significance even of the Panama invasion into perspective, for instance, it has been seen as ‘only a strike against a downstream drug finance center and never approached the narcotics heartland of the Andes’ (McCoy, 1991: 2). Certainly, a campaign involving US forces and massive resourcing of local forces did develop in the Andes themselves, but questions arise not only about the effectiveness and degree of commitment there, but also as to how far its aim of targeting the main source of drugs was fused with, and perhaps subordinated to, other goals in a ‘narco-guerrilla’ operation that had the hallmarks of earlier counterinsurgency intervention. Further doubt about the seriousness of commitment in Bush’s war arose because a promised ‘second front’ which would attempt to root out the even more significant trade in heroin from the ‘Golden Triangle’ of South East Asia came to nought. Having filed a federal prosecution in 1990 against the self-proclaimed ‘king of opium’, Khun Sa, operating out of northern Burma, ‘the gap between the attorney general’s harsh accusations and impotent actions demonstrates the limitations of a global drug war still fighting its first battles’ (McCoy, 1991: 2).

The legacy of past policies and practices

To further realise the limitations of the campaigns and the gap between rhetoric and reality, it is helpful to remember that Bush’s was not the first all-out onslaught on drugs. President Reagan had declared