

Vice City: Hong Kong in the Anglo-American War on Drugs, 1970-1979

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Panel 15: *In the Shadows of the Cold War: Marginal Actors in Global Politics*

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Abstract:

This paper explores the local consequences of a global drug war, focusing on the Anglo-American campaign to combat the heroin trade in Hong Kong. During the 1970s, the British colony emerged as a global gateway for Southeast Asian opium from the “Golden Triangle.” Its growing notoriety presented a law enforcement dilemma for the British government while attracting attracted acerbic opprobrium from American officials who linked the domestic heroin epidemic with ostensible British permissiveness. In response to mounting international outcry and growing frictions with a key Cold War ally, the United Kingdom collaborated with the United States to bring President Richard Nixon’s “War on Drugs” to Hong Kong. Throughout the decade, representatives from the British Home Office and the Hong Kong Narcotics Bureau met regularly with counterparts from the newly formed American Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) to coordinate anti-narcotics efforts and step up interdiction within the colony and across Southeast Asia. Drawing from British, American, and Hong Kong archival sources, this paper chronicles the origins, development, and significance of this joint Anglo-American campaign. Besides shedding light on an overlooked chapter in the history of international drug control, this paper also traces the broader consequences of harsher policing and more draconian laws for Hong Kong and its residents. Its tentative findings suggest that the biggest beneficiary of the campaign was not the United States or Hong Kong but the United Kingdom, who improved relations with its critical ally, piggybacked on American efforts to fight its own drug war, and reasserted its authority over an important colony.