

## Amphetamine Psychosis

A delirious take on the latest "new drug of choice"

TIME WAS THAT connoisseurs of drug war propaganda contented themselves with fare such as *Reefer Madness*, *Dragnet* reruns featuring acid-eating hippies, and health class films such as 1968's *Marijuana*, a Just Say No sermonette featuring a curiously red-eyed Sonny Bono.

Now you can cop a fix just by picking up *Rolling Stone*, the self-styled countercultural institution that once upon a time showcased the pharmaceutically fueled writings of America's premier pill popper, Hunter S. Thompson. *Rolling Stone's* January 23 issue featured the story "Plague in the Heartland," by Paul Solotaroff, the latest entry in a dubious but endlessly rewritten journalistic genre known as the "new drug of choice" story. Depending on the moment, the drug under scrutiny can be marijuana, or cocaine, or heroin, or turpentine, or Ecstasy, or PCP—better known to anyone who ever sat through a Quinn Martin Production as "angel dust." This week's special guest villain? Methamphetamine, a.k.a. "crystal meth" and "crank."

All the clichés of the form are on display in "Plague in the Heartland," worn down every bit as smooth as the teeth of a longtime meth fiend. Summary claims to ubiquity, hyper-addictiveness, and national crisis: "Cheap, easy to make and instantly addictive, crystal meth is burning a hole through rural America," avers the story's subtitle. Hyperbolic claims of uniquely intoxicating effects? "The

chemical equivalent of ten orgasms at once," swears a doctor. The revelation that this crisis is really about—egad!—the white middle class? "These aren't no-tooth yokels from trailer parks," reports the police chief of Granite Falls, Washington, where the story is mostly set. "They're kids whose moms and dads work at Boeing."

Exoticized, sinister dealers who don't care about the effects of what they're selling and who wrap themselves in the Constitution to boot? Solotaroff, with a police guard, walks up to a notorious meth-cooking site and interrogates a white-trash specimen who is equal parts *Deliverance* technical consultant and ZZ Top roadie: "He has broad logger's shoulders, a chest-length beard and eyes that dart from side to side, pulsing in their sockets." After being accused of manufacturing meth, the freak indignantly produces a glass pipe and thunders: "You see this? I made this. I'm an American citizen who makes pipes.... As for what people smoke in them, that's their deal. Their right as American citizens!"

Then there are the uncorroborated tales of horrible deeds done while high. "Plague in the Heartland" adds two new chapters to that infinite anthology, which already boasts such classic hoaxes as the college kids so whacked on LSD that they went blind staring at the sun and the wigged-out babysitters who cooked infants. Via the police chief, we learn of "the tweakers (as meth users are known)

who clubbed to death seventeen newborn calves" and "the boy, high out of his mind, who fancied his thick skull bulletproof and blew much of it off with a .25."

And finally, there's the omission that fully seals the deal: actual hard evidence of increasing and widespread use, as opposed to increased police activity and a spike in emergency room admissions "linked" to the drug (a measure that is notoriously subjective and ambiguous).

The latest stats released by federal drug warriors—who have every reason to exaggerate the use and abuse of drugs, since the bigger the crisis, the bigger their budget—tell a far less incendiary tale about meth use. Data from the 2001 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse indicate that a whopping 0.6 percent of Americans 12 years and older had done meth in the previous year; past-month use came in at 0.3 percent. Those figures were virtually unchanged from 2000. In "nonmetro" counties, past-month use of all drugs was 5.8% in 2001, up from 5.1% in 2000.

If anything, those numbers tell the sort of story that you used to expect from *Rolling Stone*, the one about how drug warriors co-opt the media and blame the mayhem surrounding the illegal drug trade on a substance's mythically evil attributes rather than its black-market status. ■

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## Disarming History

How an award-winning scholar twisted the truth about America's gun culture—and almost got away with it.

*Joyce Lee Malcolm*

"Real historical writers probe factual uncertainties, but they do not invent convenient facts and they do not ignore inconvenient facts. People are entitled to their own opinions, but not to their own facts."

—William Kelleher Storey, *Writing History*

WHEN THE *Playboy* interview with Michael Bellesiles appeared in January 2001, the Emory University history professor was riding high. He was basking in the heady glow of rave reviews and a media blitz hailing his book, *Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture*, as a "tour de force" that "changes everything." Bellesiles claimed to have discovered that, contrary to accepted opinion, guns were scarce in early America and Americans were uninterested in owning them. "The notion that a well-armed public buttressed the American dream," he assured readers, "would have appeared harebrained to most Americans before the Civil War." It was all an "invented tradition," with historians joining "actively in the mythmaking." Reviewers of *Arming America* were quick to point out the "inescapable policy implications."