1.) OVERVIEW:

a.) Last year, the centennial of US drug prohibition, starting with the Harrison Narcotics Act of 1914, passed without parades or press retrospectives. Not even a commemorative stamp from the US Postal Service.

b.) Though uncelebrated and unmarked, it has been an extraordinary century, full of rhetorical excesses, unprecedented policy disasters, and some remarkable historical characters.

c.) Just as the economic contortions of the illicit drug trade distort the politics of whole cities or countries, so its chimerical qualities lets human personalities project outsized shadows on the canvas of history.

1.) The booming Harlem heroin trade of the 1970s elevated Nicky Barnes from addicted street dealer to become New York’s first black godfather with assets of $100 million by the time he was sentenced to life in prison.

2.) The expanding Shan State drug trade raised Khun Sa from boy soldier to the Golden Triangle’s “Opium King,” controlling half the world’s illicit heroin supply by the time geopolitical pressure forced his surrender in 1996.

3.) Nixon’s drug war lifted local politician Nelson Gross from Bergen County politics to the international stage as the State Department’s Coordinator on International Narcotics Matters before he wound up in federal prison for fraud and perjury.

4.) Though few politicians prospered by identifying with the drug issue, the illicit traffic has provided rich source material for countless journalistic careers--

---unfortunately for Washington Post reporter Janet Cooke;
tragically for San Jose Mercury News investigator Gary Webb;

--admirably for Arizona journalist Charles Bowden;

--and quite successfully for man whose career brings us all here today, documentarian Adrian Cowell.

5.) Yet we must be cautious in celebrating any career built upon the elusive world of illicit drugs. Just as the drug traffic can distort a nation’s politics, so its conceptual complexity compromises the accuracy of almost any account, no matter how insightful it might have seemed at the time.

6.) Since Cowell’s two documentaries on the Shan opium trade were ultimately, like all reportage on illicit drugs, political and politicized, we can best appreciate the strength, and weakness, of his work by first finding an appropriate framework for analysis of the illicit traffic, and then inserting each of his films in that historical context.

d.) After this century of enforcement failures and policy debacles, we now have sufficient historical evidence to conclude that the “war on drugs” being fought by United Nations and the United States rests upon a fundamental misunderstanding of the global traffic.

e.) To cite but one example, in 1997, the new head of the UN Drug Control Program, Dr. Pino Arlacchi, announced an aggressive 10-year program to eliminate all opium and coca cultivation, starting in Afghanistan.

f.) Ten years later, however, the UN’s World Drug Report 2007 reported that global opium production, driven by Afghanistan’s bumper crop, had, in fact, “soared to a new record high of 6,610 tons, a 43 per cent increase over 2005.”

g.) How can we explain such a massive failure in global drug control policy?

h.) At its conceptual core, this prohibition effort assumes inelasticity in international narcotics supply.

1.) That is, when force is applied within an imagined universe of perfect coercion, then the illicit commodity should be, in the view of the US and UN, crushed in a vice-grip of coercion.

2.) But in the open world after the Cold War, supply has proven surprisingly elastic—meaning repression in one source region may actually stimulate production of narcotics in another, contributing thereby to an increase in global supply.

3.) The demand for drugs of addiction, is, by contrast, relatively inelastic: i.e. if price rises, then addicted consumers cut other consumption or try to increase income to maintain their intake of illicit drugs.
4.) Thus, if suppression reduces supply from one area, then the global price rises (due to inelastic demand), spurring old growers to plant more, and new producers or areas to enter production, thereby raising global drug supply.

5.) In effect, for a full half-century the UN and US have been pursuing a supply-control solution to the drug problem in defiance of the basic market dynamics—stimulating rather suppressing global drug supply.

2.) PROHIBITION REGIME:

a.) In a broader historical context, the collision, of policy regimes, from free trade in the nineteenth century to prohibition in the twentieth, has produced a sustained, sometimes explosive growth in world narcotics supply.

b.) After two centuries of imperial free trade that made opium a global commodity, the great powers, through treaties signed between 1907 and 1925, launched a global prohibition effort.

1.) In the decades following World War I, the League of Nations launched a suppression effort that produced a sharp decline in the legal opium trade, but it also created an illicit demand that fueled the growth of criminal syndicates in Europe, America, and Asia.

c.) After World War II, the UN inherited the League’s drug-control efforts and negotiated a succession of conventions that expanded enforcement and raised the number of prohibited drugs from just 17 in 1931 to 245 by 1995.

d.) Simultaneously, the US has launched a parallel domestic prohibition, passing the Harrison Act in 1914 to restrict opium use and the Volstead Act in 1920 to prohibit alcohol.

1.) Just as domestic alcohol prohibition was political attempt to enforce a fading Protestant morality upon a changing multiethnic society, so narcotics prohibition represented a hegemonic attempt by the world powers to extirpate the margins of resistance, whether criminal or political, beyond the bounds of the nation state.

e.) In the aftermath of World War II, two great geopolitical movements coincided to create the Golden Triangle drug trade.

1.) In the two decades after World War II, rapid decolonization Asia and Africa left behind arbitrary imperial borders, with marginalized minorities who took up arms to fight for autonomy—including the Shan revolt starting in the mid 1950s.

2.) Simultaneously, the start of the Cold War laid down an Iron Curtain across the Eurasian land mass, isolating China for a rapid national opium detoxification and creating a highland interstice in the Shan States where opium could flower to sustain Asia’s residual postwar demand.
During the first 15 years of the Cold War, the director of the US Bureau of Narcotics, Harry Anslinger, used the anti-drug campaign as an ideological bludgeon to marginalize domestic dissidents and stigmatize Washington’s communist enemies.

1.) In speeches and official reports after 1949, Anslinger charged that Communist China was the source for the world’s illicit heroin supply, offering precise details about its heroin smuggling across the country, through Southeast Asia, into world markets.

2.) Since this supposed intelligence was classified, and its elements were all imaginary with no grounding in any verifiable reality, Anslinger’s claims were irrefutable.

3.) Such Cold War propaganda precluded any serious analysis of global drug trafficking, whether dominant the trans-Atlantic network or the emerging Golden Triangle traffic.

3.) COWELL’S FILM “OPIUM TRAIL” (1966):

a.) In this Cold War political context, the release of Adrian Cowell’s documentary “The Opium Trail” in 1966 was something of a revelation.

b.) Not only did the film show, in Chris Menges’ lucid and convincing cinematography, the movement opium caravans from the Shan State into Thailand, but it found that there was no opium coming out of China.

c.) In the middle of the film, Cowell interrupts his narrative to interview Shan border guards who report that no drug caravans are coming across the border from China, providing convincing testimony that Anslinger’s allegations were false.

d.) While Anslinger’s claims about China’s control of the global heroin trade today rank with the film “Reefer Madness” as comedic artifacts from another age, back then his word was gospel and Cowell’s rebuttal played a seminal role in starting serious public discussion of drug control policy.

e.) With that low-budget, black-and-white film, Cowell established his authority as a specialist in the Southeast Asian opium trade.

4.) NIXON’S DRUG WAR:

a.) In the early 1970s, President Richard Nixon declared “war on drugs,” expanding US prohibition beyond its borders through bilateral operations in the Asian opium zone.

b.) In the first of America’s five drug wars, President Nixon scored a short-term victory with longer term complications.
1.) In his first battle in this drug war, Nixon applied diplomatic pressure on these two allies to eradicate Turkey’s opium production and close Marseille’s heroin laboratories.

2.) Then, to prevent Southeast Asia from filling the void in US supply, the Nixon White House sent a team of DEA agents to block the flow of Golden Triangle heroin towards the US.

3.) By 1974, the street price of heroin in New York was up 3-fold and purity dropped by half to around 3 percent—both strong indicators of a serious shortage.

c.) In the context of imperfect coercion in the post-colonial age, the invisible dynamics of the drug market soon turned Nixon’s victory into defeat.

1.) Though Turkey was the source for some 80 percent of US heroin supply, it produced only 7 percent of the poppy in Asia’s opium zone.

2.) With demand constant and Turkey’s supply eradicated, the illicit world price rose, stimulating opium production elsewhere along Asia’s vast southern rim.

3.) This modest eradication in one nation thus unleashed invisible market forces that transformed the drug trade on 5 continents, producing:

   a.) higher heroin output in Southeast Asia;
   b.) start of mass addiction in Europe and Australia;
   c.) amphetamine manufacture in the US;
   d.) increased opium and marijuana production in Mexico;
   e.) and, the start of drug cartels in Colombia, beginning with marijuana and moving into cocaine.

d.) This first drug war thus proved a revealing demonstration, largely ignored, of the market response to imperfect coercion that would be repeated over the next 30 years.

1.) The illicit drug market had quickly transformed suppression into stimulus—producing a shift to synthetics, increased narcotics production, and an expansion of trafficking into new markets.

5.) COWELL’S SECOND FILM “OPIUM WARLORDS” (1974):

a.) With Nixon’s drug war elevating narcotics suppression to the highest levels of U.S. foreign policy, Adrian Cowell released his feature length documentary The Opium Warlords in 1974, brilliantly illuminated by Chris Menges’ color cinematography.
b.) With wry commentary and indelible images, this film provided an incisive look inside the Shan State opium trade, portraying the entire panoply of regional actors—local farmers, merchants, and, above all, the opium warlords.

c.) At the close of the film, however, Cowell broke with cinematic convention and emerged from behind the camera to appear on screen making a plea for his alternative to Nixon’s repressive drug war—the preemptive purchase of the Shan State opium crop.

d.) Through his film’s visibility, Cowell became lead figure in an arm’s length alliance that built some serious political momentum for this proposal—including, Opium Kings Lo Hsing-han and Khun Sa, anthropologist David Feingold, and the chair of the House Asian and Pacific Affairs committee Lester Wolff.

e.) In testimony before Congress, anthropologist Feingold addressed the chief flaw in the preemptive purchase proposal by assuring legislators, from his deep knowledge of tribal folkways that economic laws of supply and demand need not apply.

f.) In July 1977, however, that momentum collapsed when Malthea Falco, then Senior Adviser to the Secretary of State for International Narcotics Matters, told the House Committee on Narcotics Abuse—in testimony Cowell excised from Part III of his 1978 film—that the preemptive purchase scheme would simply stimulate additional opium production in the Shan State, thereby meeting the demands of both the proposed purchase and the international illicit market.

a.) Implicit of Falco’s remarks was the first awareness, in an official U.S. statement, that government policy could, in fact, serve as a stimulus for illicit narcotics production.

g.) The failure of his policy proposal, both political and intellectual, blunted the impact of his three-part documentary, “Opium”—an exploration of the politics of the heroin trade in both Southeast Asia and the United States released just a year later, in 1978.

h.) With that defeat, Cowell turned his attention to the Amazon for the next 20 years.

6.) GOLDEN TRIANGLE:

a.) With the end of the Cold War in 1991, a new world order and its economic globalization soon transformed the dynamics of the illicit drug trade.

1.) For the forty years of the Cold War, rival superpowers, had enforced a global coercive regime by imposing a rigid bipolar division across Eur-Asian land mass, militarizing these frontiers, and reinforcing the repressive capacities of their respective client states.
b.) But now the collapse of the Iron Curtain destroyed this global template that had shaped the global traffic for forty years--allowing a rapid expansion of opium smuggling across former Soviet Central Asia, creating new criminal syndicates, and opening smuggling routes that criss-crossed China, Russia, and Eastern Europe.

1.) Complicating any attempt at crop reduction, the world's leading heroin producers, Burma and Afghanistan, became outlaw states--diplomatically isolated, detached from the licit world economy, and economically dependent upon the illicit opium trade.

2.) Driven by these complex forces, heroin—eclipsed by the surging cocaine traffic in the Americas during the 1980s--recovered its historic preeminence as the leading illicit narcotic and became, by the late 1990s, something of a world drug.

3.) In the context of globalization’s reduced coercive controls, the prohibition regime’s only sustained success after the Cold War, the decline of opium cultivation in Southeast Asia’s “Golden Triangle,” stimulated a parallel pandemic of amphetamine abuse that swept the region’s slums.

c.) In the aftermath of the Cold War, Burma, long the heart of the Golden Triangle, defied the world order by harnessing the country's drug trade to the twin tasks of national security and development.

1.) Through this a covert alliance with these borderland drug lords, Rangoon gained funds for both military modernization and a future capacity to curb these same drug lords.

2.) During the 1980s, Khun Sa became Burma's dominant drug lord and embraced the Shan secessionist revolt--forcing Rangoon, backed by $2 Billion in Chinese military aid, to launch a sustained offensive to regain control of these strategic borderlands.

3.) In the last years of this war, Khun Sa, desperate for income to defend his rebel enclave, began mass marketing cut-price, low-purity methamphetamine tablets, called “yaba,” to poor Thai consumers, unleashing an epidemic that soon swept Southeast Asia.

d.) COWELL’S RETROSPECTIVE *The Heroin Wars*” (1996):

1.) At the close of his career, Cowell drew upon his private archive of film footage, now housed here at University of Washington, to produce a retrospective of his 30 years’ reportage the Shan States, broadcast as a three-part series on PBS “Frontline” in 1996.

2.) Midst this major shift in the geopolitics of illicit drugs that had created their parallel careers, the end of Cowell’s great journalistic adventure in
the Golden Triangle coincided with the eclipse of its greatest warlord Khun Sa.

e.) Just a few years after Cowell’s trilogy was broadcast, the combination of Burma’s pressure on its opium warlords and the success of UN opium eradication served as stimulus for amphetamine production in Southeast Asia and poppy cultivation in both Asia and the Andes.

1.) After the surrender of Cowell’s archetypal opium warlord, Khun Sa, in 1996, his successors along Burma’s borderlands, the United Wa State Army (UWSA), made a decisive shift from opium to amphetamines.

2.) In the late 1990s, the UWSA, at Rangoon's behest, began working with the UN Drug Control Program to replace opium with alternative crops in the Wa hills—a tenuous cooperation facilitated by their simultaneous shift into amphetamine manufacture.

3.) By mid 2000, Burma’s warlords were exporting some 600 million in methamphetamine tablets, worth $2.8 billion annually, to Thailand.

4.) Once again, prohibition, in the context of imperfect coercion, had provided stimulus for a dramatic expansion of both production and consumption in the illicit drug market.

7.) AFGHANISTAN:

a.) In Central Asia the Cold War and its aftermath produced a sustained expansion of heroin production in a region that served, for nearly 50 years, as battleground for contending global forces.

1.) In the 1980s, the Afghan/Pakistan borderlands became both a covert-war zone and the world's leading heroin producer.

2.) If the Shan State opium trade thrived in a geopolitical interstice largely removed from the tectonic tensions of the Cold War, Afghanistan’s heroin traffic, by contrast, thrived at the crossroads of global, regional, and local conflicts.

3.) In such circumstances, opium moved from the geopolitical margins, where Cowell had found it back in the 1960s, to become major illicit commodity determining the outcome of global conflicts.

4.) In effect, Afghanistan illustrates the political economy of illicit drugs always implicit in Southeast Asia, in ways that complicated Cowell’s preemptive purchase scheme, and was now fully explicit in ways that were beyond his conceptual frame.

b.) During its surrogate war against Soviet intervention from 1979 to 1989, the CIA mobilized a mix of Islamic fundamentalism, Pakistani intrigues, and opium trafficking to inflict a punishing defeat on the Red Army.
1.) Working through Pakistan’s Inter-Service Intelligence, or ISI, the CIA armed Afghan mujahedeen fighters who collected a compulsory opium tax from Afghan farmers.

2.) Consequently, Afghanistan’s opium harvest grew ten fold, from 250 to 2000 tons, during the CIA’s covert war of the 1980s.

3.) As a network of heroin laboratories opened along the Afghan-Pakistan border, Pakistan became, by 1981, the world’s largest heroin producer, supplying 60 percent of America’s illicit demand.

4.) When this covert operation was ending in May 1990, the Washington Post reported that the CIA’s chief asset Gulbuddin Hekmatyar was also the rebels’ leading heroin trafficker, operating a string of heroin labs in Pakistan’s North West Frontier Province.

c.) After a savage civil war from 1989 to 1996, the Taliban captured Kabul and doubled the country’s opium production to a record harvest of 4,600 tons by 1999, making Afghanistan the source for 80 percent of the world’s heroin supply.

1.) But in July 2000, as a devastating drought entered its second year and mass starvation spread across Afghanistan, the Taliban’s Mullah Omar ordered a sudden ban on all opium cultivation in an apparent bid for international recognition-- cutting the harvest to only 185 metric tons in 2001, a 94 percent reduction.

2.) When the US bombing began in October 2001, the Taliban regime, already a hollow shell from opium eradication, collapsed at the first bombs.

d.) To capture Kabul after September 2001, the CIA shipped in $70 million to mobilize its old coalition of warlords who had long dominated the northeast heroin trade and the Pashtun drug lords active along the southeastern border-- creating political conditions ideal for the resumption of opium production.

e.) After capturing Kabul and the countryside, these same warlords presided over a proliferation of opium planting, raising Afghanistan’s’ production from just 185 tons in 2001 to 8,200 tons in 2007—providing 90 percent of world heroin supply, 53 percent of Afghanistan’s GDP, and funding a revival of the Taliban guerrillas.

1.) When we realize that cocaine provided, at peak, just 3 percent of Colombia’s GDP, the extraordinary extent of Afghanistan’s dependence on opium is a development without historical precedent.

f.) As US forces ended major combat operations in October 2014, the New York Times reported that the drawdown in U.S. air operations had allowed the Taliban to resume mass-formation attacks in the north, northeast, and south, killing record numbers of Afghan army and police.
g.) As of late 2014, the unchecked flood of illicit income from opium funded the flow of peasant fighters into the Taliban in sufficient numbers to the world’s most powerful army.

h.) If this analysis is correct, then an illicit commodity had helped defeat a major military intervention by the world’s sole superpower—demonstrating that, in the era of globalization, an illicit commodity can exercise sufficient autonomy to be treated as a significant independent factor in global politics.

8.) CONCLUSIONS:

a.) What can we make of Adrian Cowell’s extraordinary career lived at the cusp of history, from Cold War opium traffic to post-Cold War globalization.

b.) Although his political analysis of warlord politics was consistently incisive, Cowell seemed to romanticize the Shan States, and indeed remote rural regions worldwide that were the locus for his work, leading him to the conclusion that a particular people’s culture could somehow trump global economic forces.

c.) Looking back over this 40 year career, Cowell’s analysis was at its best in those remote, semi-isolated interstices, such as the Shan States of the 1960s; but less appropriate when complex geopolitics intruded—as they did in the Golden Triangle and Afghanistan in the 1980s and thereafter.

d.) In retrospect, Cowell’s contribution lay in both his skillful reportage on the Shan States opium traffic in a particular period, the 1960s and 1970s, and his informed critique of US drug policy, but his failures arose from the seeming presumption that this knowledge was sufficient to propose simple solutions on a complex problem.

e.) But whatever the assessment of his strengths and weakness, Adrian Cowell created an extraordinary visual record for the Shan State drug trade, in a critical historical moment between decolonization and globalization that will serve as an invaluable archive for those who wish to understand our changing world.

f.) Thank you.