

# Targeting Who?

## The DEA's Vision of Terrorism

### Agent Automatic

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“And what could be more natural nowadays than to suspect someone of a fondness for drugs?”

– Stanislaw Lem

“Target America: Eyes Open to the Damage Drugs Cause” is the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency’s (DEA) traveling educational exhibit which attempts to illustrate a connection between the drug war and the war on terror. The operating assumption behind the exhibit is that terrorists need narcotic sales to fund their campaigns, and by extension, buying or selling drugs promotes terrorism.

In order to drive this connection home, Target America’s entrance to the display consisted of twisted I-beams, and concrete chunks from 9/11 Ground Zero and assorted children’s toys. The Detroit Science Center hosted the exhibit and on the afternoon I attended several local grade schools had just dropped their students off.

While I worked my way through the center, children shouted, played tag, and seemed generally unaffected by the gravity of their surroundings. The exhibits fixation on children (as expressed through the ubiquitous use of toys in the displays) was apparently intended to function on two levels.

First, to make adults empathize with the parents of children killed in the 9/11 bombing, and second, children were supposed to feel that it could have been them, as if they could be the next victims of narco-terrorists. Like a confidence scam, Target America emphasized emotional responses rather than critical reasoning. Its approach and execution were that of a shell game, bait with terror then switch to the drug war; keep everyone guessing and collect the cash.

The first display was an exhaustive study of opium production in Afghanistan. An information placard stated, “Afghanistan has recently regained its position as the leading producer of opium in the world for illegal trafficking.” The text ignored that this current boom in opium production is occurring under U.S. occupation.

Also omitted was the fact that the Taliban, who limited opium production during their rule, carried out terrorism endorsed by the United States government. Conversely, countries which still allow opium production, including Australia, India and Turkey, utilize many of the same poppy fields today as they did during the era of Britain’s compulsory opium importation which resulted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Opium Wars in China.

Perhaps this information was left out because the exhibit designers were too busy constructing an ersatz opium lab. Not surprisingly, a faux opium brick and a functioning opium press were not included in the “hands on” portions of the display.

Needless to say, Target America never implicated the United States as supporting terrorists or drug suppliers, opting instead for myopic finger pointing. For example, Pfizer Pharmaceuticals, which manufactures Sudafed (often used in methamphetamine production) was not linked to the war on terror.

However, the display did mention that the “respectable [German] pharmaceutical company,” Bayer, was responsible for first isolating heroin in 1903. Thus, some producers and developers of narcotics were linked, albeit opaquely, to terrorism whereas others were not.

After leaving the opium exhibit, I encountered a simulated methamphetamine lab which had been constructed to look like a hotel room. The lab was flanked with photos of dirty bathrooms and people shooting up beside sleeping children. Inside the “meth lab” there were road flares, hand guns and cans of starter fluid placed with labels facing outward like a mega-store display.

Also present was a bottle of Pepsi, although a CocaCola container would be more appropriate because cocaine was an original ingredient in Coke and the company’s complicity in the violent oppression of union organizers in Columbia easily constitutes terrorism.

Adjacent to the meth lab was a large photo of Osama Bin Laden hanging above a dummy Stinger surface-to-air missile. Unstated in this display was that while a terrorist firing this weapon is a criminal, the corporation who manufactures it remains free of all culpability.

Nearby, Target America’s most forthright assertion mentions the Medellin drug cartel which “while conducting a campaign of terror on one hand...are building schools and supporting the local community with their drug profits on the other.” Surprisingly this statement is posed under the heading, “Who is a narco-terrorist?” The answer seems to be “depends on who you ask.”

While poverty was linked to drug use throughout this exhibit, nowhere was it more apparent than in “The Crack Den” wherein a dilapidated baby carriage and dirty diapers sat beneath peeling wallpaper. There was no mention of the landlord’s place in this squalor.

The absent referent being that if the crack heads so desired, they could turn the place into a page from *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine. I’m curious what the visiting school children made of this connection between poverty and terrorism; if they were internalizing our national mythology that places the affluent above such base desires? According to the buses outside, many of these kids were from inner city schools, where funding runs short and parents work multiple jobs just to make ends meet. Unfortunately, this exhibit had nothing to indicate that a person could be both poor and innocent.

A history of addiction included giant renditions of pulp novel covers such as *Marijuana Girl*, *Refer Club* and William Burroughs’ *Junkie*. Apparently the creators of this display failed to notice that the central argument of *Junkie* contends that addiction is a universal part of the human experience (whether the addiction is to caffeine, heroin or religion).

Hanging on an adjacent wall were a pair of ruined lungs which seemingly implicated big tobacco with terrorism although this was not overtly stated. Similarly, in the world of Target America, alcohol was hardly a concern despite a staggering amount of alcohol related accidents, violence and deaths.

“What Remains” was an exhibit built on the wreckage of an automobile, surrounded by bongos, toys, and family photos. Some of the children played with the toys, seemingly unaware of their symbolism.

I used to wonder what happened to all those old anti-drug commercials, but now know they’ve been recycled for Target America. A commercial warning of the dangers of Ecstasy showed teens running through fields laughing, but later becoming anxious and paranoid until there is only one young woman remaining in a harsh desert environment.

It would be great if the Target America people had a similar commercial for Prozac which ended in a suicide or a workplace shooting, since these occasionally have occurred as a result of the drug.

Curiously, later in the exhibit, Prozac was listed as a cure for addiction while a poster a short distance down the isle stated “6 out of 10 drug users suffered from mental illness.” Unfortunately, it didn’t speculate that in some cases mental illness might be the problem with addiction as a symptom rather than the cause.

Perhaps strangest of all was the way in which the entire exhibition seemed like a trade show designed around the drug culture. At times the displays appeared instructional, telling viewers where to go for drugs, what was needed to manufacture them, current street prices, and so on.

Like a trade show the noise was overwhelming. At no point during the exhibit could I escape pre-recorded gun shots, sirens, and simulated drug deals. This emphasis on disorientation was also embodied in the display’s labyrinthine floor plan.

Near the exit, interactive monitors allowed visitors to assign a virtual DEA agent to a drug bust. There were also hydro-grow closets, so if a visitor happened to see one at a relative’s house then they could call the cops and fill them in, just like in the video game.

According to some adjacent material, the U.S. is under siege from all directions and must stand strong against the drug underworld's power to "destabilize nations." While leaving the Science Center, I passed a video of the DEA administrator describing "how sinister the drug culture has become."

However, I'm wondering who targets America; terrorists or the DEA? Overall, the poor seem to be targets of nearly everyone. After several hours inside Target America, I left feeling unsettled and suspicious, as if I am being watched and simultaneously need to be watchful for something oppressive, sinister and unseen.

# fifth Estate

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