

CHAPTER 1

The Acid Casualty

One day in the fall of 2001, I realized that I hadn't seen any LSD in an awfully long time. I was living on the Eastern Shore of Maryland at the time, where the drug had been a fixture of my social scene since the early nineties. Most of my peers had continued dosing through college or whatever they chose to do instead. Even some watermen and farmers I knew had tripped on occasion.

Because most acid users don't take the drug with any regularity—a trip here or there is the norm—its absence didn't immediately register. It's the kind of drug that appears in waves, so the inability to find it at any given time could be chalked up to the vagaries of the illicit drug market.

I began asking friends who were going to hippie happenings to look for the drug. Eventually, I had a network of people poking around for it at concerts and festivals across the country, as well as in towns where you'd expect to find it, such as Boulder and San Francisco. They found nothing—and no one who'd even seen a hit of LSD since sometime in 2001—even at Burning Man, a gathering of thousands in the desert of Nevada. Strolling around Burning Man and being unable to find acid is something like walking into a bar and finding the taps dry.

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In the fall of 2002, I enrolled at the University of Maryland's public-policy school in College Park, in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. Here, too, I continued my search for acid—and found the campus dry. Undergraduate hippies had only high school memories of the once culture-defining drug.

At some point, I decided that the disappearance of acid was nearly, if not totally, complete. I went to see a professor in my department, Peter Reuter, one of the most well-respected drug-policy researchers in the nation.

"Acid is gone," I told him.

"How'd you come to this theory?" he asked.

"I can't find it," I said, "and none of my friends can, either." I knew I sounded like a fool, but that was all I had.

"That's not how we do things in this field," he said. "Drug availability goes in cycles. That's not really a series of trends—that's just how it is." He pointed to a book behind me. "Here, hand me that."

He opened the 2002 *Monitoring the Future* report, which is produced by the University of Michigan and tracks drug use among American teens. "As you'll see," he said, running his finger across the LSD table, "use has been fairly steady over the last . . ." He paused and looked up. "That's interesting," he said, looking at the data for high school seniors. "LSD use is at an historic low: 3.5 percent." He then regrouped and continued with his lecture, telling me about supply and demand and peaks and valleys—and that he was certain the numbers for acid would rise in the 2003 survey.

Drug cycles are widely presumed to be the result of a combination of cultural shifts and the effectiveness of drug interdiction, but they're generally not well understood. Supply and demand, however, inarguably play a large role. When a drug becomes scarce, its price increases, enticing producers and distributors to invest more heavily in it, which increases supply, Reuter explained.

I told him that I wasn't so sure. His theories might not apply this time. There simply was no acid out there, and there hadn't been for several years. I rambled on about the end of the Grateful Dead and the collapse of giant raves. He was unmoved.

"Check the 2003 numbers," he said. "They may be online by now. If levels remain the same, then you've got something."

The 2003 numbers had just come out. I checked annual LSD use: it was at 1.9 percent, nearly a 50 percent drop. I checked a few other sources. Evidence of acid's decline could be found practically everywhere—in the falling statistics in an ongoing federal survey of drug use, in the number of emergency-room cases involving the drug, in a huge drop in federal arrests for LSD. I took the numbers back to Reuter.

"This isn't a trend," he said. "This is an event."

Like all drugs, acid is a bellwether of American society. Its effect on our culture in the sixties and seventies was immeasurable, and its disappearance in the early years of the twenty-first century was limited to the United States. Cultural commentators who look for trends in unemployment numbers, presidential-approval ratings, or car and housing purchases are missing something fundamental if they don't also consider statistics on drug use. Little tells us more about the state of America than what Americans are doing to get high.

Life in the United States, of course, is similar in many ways to life anywhere in the developed world. But our nation diverges sharply from the rest of the world in a few crucial ways. Americans work hard: 135 hours a year more than the average Briton, 240 hours more than the typical French worker, and 370 hours—that's nine weeks—more than the average German. We also play hard. A global survey released in 2008 found that Americans are more than twice as likely to smoke pot as Europeans. Forty-two percent of Americans had puffed at one point; percentages for citizens of various European nations were all under 20. We're also four times as likely as Spaniards to have done coke and roughly ten times more likely than the rest of Europe.

"We're just a different kind of country," said the U.S. drug czar's spokesman, Tom Riley, when asked about the survey. "We have higher drug-use rates, a higher crime rate, many things that go with a highly free and mobile society."

Different, indeed. There may be no people on earth with a more twisted and complex relationship to drugs. Much of our preconceived self-image turns out to be wrong: libertine continentals have nothing on us in terms of drug use, and American piety hasn't prevented us

from indulging—in fact, it has sometimes encouraged it. Much of our conventional wisdom about American drug use—that the Puritans and the members of our founding generation were teetotalers or mild drinkers, that the drug trade is dominated by huge criminal organizations such as the Mafia and the Bloods, that crack use has declined significantly since the eighties—turns out to be wrong, too.

If there's one certainty about American drug use, it's this: we're always looking for a better way to feed our voracious appetite for getting high—for something cheaper, faster, less addictive, or more powerful. Drug trends feed themselves as word spreads about the amazing new high that's safe and nonaddictive. Then we discover otherwise—and go searching for the next great high. We often circle back to the original drug, forgetting why we quit it in the first place.

The morning of November 6, 2000, a day before the Bush-Gore election, William Leonard Pickard and his assistant, Clyde Apperson, were busy loading a massive LSD lab they'd secreted in a converted Atlas-E missile silo in Wamego, Kansas, into the back of a Ryder truck. Tubing, buckets, glassware—together with the right industrial chemicals and a lot of expertise, their equipment was capable of rapidly producing millions of doses of acid. When the men were finished, Pickard, a Harvard graduate and a legend in the LSD world for being one of the drug's top producers since the sixties, climbed into a rented Buick LeSabre. Apperson piloted the truck.

Cruising west on Highway 24, the convoy was followed by two police cars, which pulled behind the vehicles and turned on their lights and sirens. Neither Pickard nor Apperson pulled over.

After several miles, a state trooper was able to speed in front of the truck and bring it to a halt. Pickard tried to drive around the stopped vehicles but was blocked. With the Buick still moving, the fifty-five-year-old opened the door and rolled out of the car, then got up and took off on foot toward a nearby housing development. Special Agent Carl Nichols of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), who was following behind the patrol cars, ran after him with trooper Brian K. Smith. Pickard had about a twenty-foot head start.

“Stop! Police!” Smith shouted over and over as he lumbered after a man nearly twice his age. The race went around the corner of a house and up an embankment, then through a yard and a cul-de-sac, then down a street. As if on a Hollywood director’s cue, a car zipped down the street in front of Nichols and Smith, who were forced to wait to let it pass. Pickard, meanwhile, showed no signs of slowing. The lawmen legged it up another hill along a driveway. Again as if on cue, Smith, leading Nichols, slipped in the mud and fell. He got up and crested the hill, but Pickard was gone.

“We didn’t know beforehand that Pickard was a marathon runner,” Nichols told me later. “That would have been useful.”

Pickard darted through the woods and down a stream to throw off the dogs that were sent after him. He made it to a farmhouse outside Wamego and spent the night in the cab of a pickup truck parked in a barn as helicopters swarmed overhead. An alert went out for citizens to be on the lookout for one of the world’s most notorious drug dealers. He’s armed and very dangerous, it said, though neither warning was true. A farmer spotted him in the barn the next morning and called the police.

In Palm Beach County, Florida, 1,300 miles away, thousands of elderly men and women were struggling to decipher the state’s butterfly ballots. After weeks of legal battles, the Supreme Court sent George W. Bush to the White House, marking the end of an era that saw the comeback of LSD, the spread of Ecstasy, and the rise to political power of the sixties generation. In reaction to that rise, the ascent of Bush would be accompanied by an aggressive battle against all things liberal, as well as by the virtual eradication of a primary symbol of the American countercultural rebellion—the first of three sins Republicans had long sought to hang on their Democratic opposition by calling it the party of “acid, abortion, and amnesty.”

For Pickard, it was the worst two days of his life—“the long night of the soul,” as he called it in a letter from Lompoc Federal Prison. He was “shot through with tears, fear, searchlights, the thunder of choppers, fishtailing squad cars and drawn revolvers, Nazi shepherds, breathless running down creekbeds to throw off the bloodhounds, visions of worlds devastated forever, [my wife] two weeks from delivery

and alone, and all the other feelings that arise while being hunted and captured by the armed clergy.”

Pickard would receive two concurrent life sentences without the possibility of parole for conspiracy to manufacture LSD. DEA officials asserted that Pickard’s Kansas lab produced 2.2 pounds of LSD—about 10 million doses, with a street value of \$10 million—every five weeks. They had confiscated, they claimed, 90.86 pounds of LSD, by leaps the largest seizure in history.

They also boasted that this single bust had cut off 95 percent of all available LSD in the nation.

In an article published in *Slate* shortly after the new drug numbers had come out, I wrote about the disappearance of LSD. All of the available yardsticks, including data from the federal Drug Abuse Warning Network (DAWN), which charts emergency room data in twenty-one major cities, measured a steep drop-off in LSD use. DAWN, run by the Department of Health and Human Services, isn’t a scientific survey; it merely records the “mentions” of drugs by emergency-room patients. (For instance, if you visited the ER with a broken finger and hospital personnel asked if you were on drugs and you said, “Yes, LSD,” that would go down in DAWN as an LSD mention, even if you were fibbing. If you answered, “Yes, LSD and pot,” both drug mentions would appear.) But DAWN numbers are still a good rough measure of drug use. Between 1995 and 2000, LSD mentions remained relatively stable, hovering at around 2,500 per six-month period. But in the second half of 2001, DAWN LSD mentions dropped below 1,000 for the first time. In the next six-month period, mentions fell below 500.

DAWN project director Dr. Judy Ball told me that what is notable about this decline is that it occurred in every metropolitan area surveyed. The drop in acid mentions was not local or even regional—it was national.

Nobody collects nationwide arrest data for LSD trafficking and possession, but federal arrests for these crimes had also tumbled in recent years. The DEA recorded 203 arrests in fiscal year 2000, 95 in FY 2001, 41 in FY 2002, and 19 in FY 2003. In the first quarter of 2004, the feds arrested only three people on LSD charges. In the

LSD haven of San Francisco, the DEA recorded no arrests in 2000 and just 20 in 2002, according to Special Agent Richard Meyer of the agency's San Francisco office.

One possible explanation for the decline could be that youthful attitudes about LSD had changed for the worse, dragging use down with them. But the high-school surveys for the period show that both perceived-risk and disapproval rates for the drug declined. So why hadn't consumption kept up with perception?

I suggested that Pickard's arrest came at a time when LSD was vulnerable, employing the well-worn "perfect storm" analogy. There's no doubt that Pickard was at some point one of the biggest—if not the biggest—producers in the nation. His incarceration, combined with the two other major cultural events I mentioned to Reuter—the demise of both the Grateful Dead and of giant raves—might have been enough to do acid in.

The LSD market took an early blow in 1995, when Jerry Garcia died and the Grateful Dead stopped touring. For thirty years, Dead tours had been essential to keeping LSD users and dealers connected. The DEA was aware of the connection and wrote about it in a 1994 divisional field assessment. After Garcia's death, Phish picked up part of the Dead's fan base—and the vestiges of its LSD-distribution network. In 1996, LSD use among twelfth graders peaked at 8.8 percent. By the end of 2000, Phish had stopped touring as well, and the survey numbers for LSD began to tumble.

Around the same time, the thousand-plus-person raves that were popular in the nineties—and always swimming with Ecstasy and LSD, a good chunk of which was probably dropped off by the roving delivery system of the Dead or Phish—began to fade out as police began targeting them with more intensity. They were finished off by the RAVE (Reducing Americans' Vulnerability to Ecstasy) Act of 2003, which threatened rave organizers with decades in prison if anyone at one of their events was arrested on drug charges—a virtual life sentence waiting to happen, given the crowd. The death of the massive rave brought on a flowering of a million intimate underground parties. Yet the closed nature of these smaller affairs often put them beyond the reach of not only the police, but also the LSD network.

With the collapse of the Dead, Phish, and the rave, a drug subculture that was maintained by touring musicians and DJs playing

for thousands at a time found itself adrift. At the same time, it lost a major producer.

Due to the spiritual qualities of the experience it induces, acid is produced and distributed unlike any other drug—with cultish secrecy and evangelical zeal. LSD is a highly difficult substance to make, and recipes for it, unlike those for Ecstasy or meth, are fiercely guarded. (Recipes on the Internet are generally bogus or not detailed enough to be of any use.) In the early seventies, the government took down several dozen members of the drug's influential distribution network, known as the Brotherhood of Eternal Love. Despite facing long prison terms, the leaders of the group refused to testify against one another, which allowed the network to survive the jailing of Grateful Dead sound engineer Owsley Stanley—who financed the band with proceeds from his acid empire—and other top producers.

“The prosecutors had never seen anything like the Brotherhood,” Michael Kennedy, the group's attorney, told author Robert Greenfield for his biography of Timothy Leary. “They brought in some informants from outside and did some infiltration, but nobody ever rolled on anybody else in that organization.”

Pickard has hinted to me that he was a member of the Brotherhood. Although it's uncertain whether he was, he was certainly active in the LSD scene at the same time. By 2000, he had attained such status in the acid world that his bust sent shock waves through the system.

My *Slate* piece exploded on the Internet, as one ex-hippie after another forwarded it around the globe. After the story ran, my inbox was flooded with messages—some from people asking if I knew where they could find some acid, others telling stories from the sixties. Not a single person wrote to say that I was wrong, that acid could still be found somewhere in the United States.

A letter mailed to me at the university, though, caught my attention. The return address included a prisoner number and the town of Lompoc, California. It was from William Leonard Pickard. DEA agents never seized 90.86 pounds of LSD, he wrote. They're lying. Check the court transcripts.



LSD is one of the most powerful drugs ever created. A mere 20 micrograms—that’s 20 millionths of a gram—can radically alter one’s perception of reality for up to half a day. There is no known lethal dose, although people have gone into comas when exposed to too much. One example: an FBI agent who accidentally drenched himself while searching an LSD lab run by Pickard in the eighties, despite Pickard’s attempt to warn him to wear protective gear. The agent had to be induced into a coma with Thorazine. He came to several days later and went home, but the Thorazine—which suppresses LSD’s psychedelic effects—wore off while he was in the shower. He started tripping again and slipped back into a coma. He did survive, however.

Albert Hofmann, the Swiss chemist who invented the drug in 1938, called LSD “medicine for the soul.” Most subsequent users have followed his lead, describing their trips in spiritual terms. Countless artists, writers, filmmakers, and musicians have sought to document this ineffable experience. Even Tony Soprano has gotten in on the psychedelic act: In the third-to-last episode of *The Sopranos*, he takes peyote, pukes, and strolls through a casino. There he spies a roulette wheel and tells his companion that it operates on the same principle as the solar system—one of the many insights that seem profound while tripping but are more likely nonsense. Religion scholar Huston Smith participated in Leary’s infamous LSD experiments at Harvard and noted that his trips seemed similar to transcendental experiences described by the world’s great mystics.

Acid inspires an endless stream of questioning that wouldn’t be out of place in a Philosophy 101 class. Who am I? Why am I here? What is life? What is reality? The act of questioning everything, regardless of whether it actually leads to any answers, can mark a new level of independence in a person. To the acid initiate, a tripping sixteen-year-old is truly thinking on his own for the very first time. If existence is contingent upon thought, as Descartes suggested, then the LSD experience can mark the beginning of one’s existence.

Because the psychedelic experience is so mentally subversive, it’s less appealing to people who are relatively content in their worldview. Acid is perfect as a rite-of-passage drug, something to help a person transition from one stage of life to another, which explains why so

many traditional cultures have used psychedelics in initiation ceremonies. Researchers in Europe are studying whether psychedelics can ease the fear of death in the terminally ill. Just as it can help kick-start one's life, so the thinking goes, it can help ease a person's departure from it.

The disappearance of LSD didn't mean an absence of melting walls in America. Head-trippers in the first decade of the twenty-first century turned to a variety of other psychedelics, from plant-based drugs such as ayahuasca and salvia to a host of lab-synthesized "research chemicals." Indeed, Americans' desire for inebriation is remarkably resilient. Aside from the occasional spike or dip in use, for the better part of the past four hundred years, the American desire to get blotto has been fairly steady. Dramatic movements toward or away from specific drugs don't happen in isolation. They're often related to changing patterns in the use of another drug.

On the Eastern Shore, my roommate had a healthy magic-mushroom-growing operation going in one of our bathrooms, and we readily consumed his fungal harvest in place of LSD. It wouldn't be too much of a stretch to say that 'shrooms became part of our daily diet, though they became less and less powerful unless we took a few days off. By the third straight day of doing them, they would effectively stop working, no matter how many we ate. Rather than creating a dependence, this diminishing psychedelic return makes them impossible to become addicted to.

Perhaps because our lives were both still in transition—he had just left the U.S. Army—the experience was almost always pleasant and profound. Later, when I was out of school and working toward a career, I found 'shrooming extremely uncomfortable. Federal drug-use statistics indicate that I have a lot of company in "growing out" of psychedelics—the bulk of users are in their mid-to-late teens or early twenties. After that, reported use of psychedelics ebbs toward zero. Of course, drug use itself doesn't disappear as Americans age—just hallucinogenic drug use—which says something about the level of our interest, as adults, in having our minds blown.

By the time acid was criminalized, in 1966, it had gone from the domain of academia to the realm of revolution. LSD fueled an upheaval that was ready for something mind-blowing. Indeed, though

the civil rights and antiwar movements had their geneses before acid became prevalent in the hippie underground, it's likely that without LSD, the sixties would have more closely resembled previous waves of American leftism. With it, there emerged a full-grown counterculture, a church of opposition to mainstream American values.

Those values, suggested Alexis de Tocqueville, are what you get when you mix democracy with America's fervent Christianity. The idea of the American republic as a self-perfecting phenomenon has blended with our religious idealism to shape the way that we've viewed drugs and insobriety throughout U.S. history. "Religion in America takes no direct part in the government of society, but it must be regarded as the first of their political institutions," wrote the French social scientist in his landmark nineteenth-century travelogue *Democracy in America*. "However irksome an enactment may be, the citizen of the United States complies with it, not only because it is the work of the majority, but because it is his own, and he regards it as a contract to which he is himself a party. . . . While in Europe the same classes sometimes resist even the supreme power, the American submits without murmur to the authority of the pettiest magistrate."

Of course, Tocqueville also identifies another key component of American society: individualism. But the combination of religious faith and respect for the law has undoubtedly led to the prohibition movements that have coursed through American culture since shortly after the Revolution. "Societies are formed which regard drunkenness as the principal cause of the evils of the state, and solemnly bind themselves to give an example to temperance," Tocqueville observed, adding in a footnote, "At the time of my stay in the United States"—the 1830s—"the temperance societies already consisted of more than 270,000 members; and their effect had been to diminish the consumption of strong liquors by 500,000 gallons per annum in Pennsylvania alone."

The decision to get high is always a personal one. Ask a fan of psychedelics about drugs and he'll generally tell you that done responsibly, a regimen of recreational mind alteration aids one in living an examined life. But drug use has consequences for others, too,

be they the children of the neglectful user or the doctor who handles highs gone wrong. The battle between common good and individual liberty has long defined the American story, and it has always been fought especially hard over inebriation of any kind.

When it comes to drugs, Americans have put precious little stock in the concept of pleasure, at least officially. Speed is acceptable as long as it boosts a kid's attention span and isn't just a good time. "Euphoria" is listed as a negative side effect of pharmaceutical drugs. Ours is a nation in which medical professionals who prescribe narcotics face the real prospect of prison time even when staying within accepted medical boundaries. Ronald McIver, a doctor from North Carolina, is now doing thirty years in a federal prison for reducing more pain than the government thought appropriate, although his prescribing habits were well within accepted medical practices. When pleasure is suspected, American drug use gets tricky, particularly when that high might do some real good, as in the case of medical marijuana.

Thus it was in drugs that sixties radicalism found its most visible form of cultural disobedience. While mainstream America took prescription uppers and downers and drank eminently legal martinis, the counterculture dropped a new drug that gave it a perception of reality that matched its revolutionary hopes. "There are the makings here of a complete social division: revolution is in the head, along the highways of perception and understanding. The psychedelic experience, being entirely subjective, is self-authenticating," argues Colin Greenland in his book *The Entropy Exhibition: Michael Moorcock and the British New Wave in Science Fiction*, which posits sixties youth culture as an "alien" society. "It gave its first advocates an inexorable sense of rightness in opposing their holistic, libertarian ethos to the discriminatory and repressive outlook of their elders. In legislating against cannabis and LSD, the governments of America and Europe were not only outlawing drugs that encouraged disaffection among the young but . . . were reaffirming faith in Western materialism and a single objective reality."

Psychedelic drugs give one a very real feeling that there's some type of intangible divide between those who have turned on and those who haven't. The psychedelic experience—with LSD's being

perhaps the most powerful—defies credible characterization, largely because accounts of it strike the uninitiated as highly unbelievable and seem to the initiated incomplete. “Non-acid takers regard the LSD trip as a remarkable flight from reality, whereas cautious devotees feel they’ve flown into reality,” writes Richard Neville in his 1970 “guide to revolution,” *Playpower*. “After an acid trip, you can reject everything you have ever been taught.”

LSD didn’t disappear after it was criminalized. The American government wasn’t toppled, either. Rather, the nation was able to absorb acid and the counterculture into mainstream consciousness—probably because there was something fundamentally American about both from the beginning. LSD is for questers, and Americans have always been on a quest, whether it’s to go west, to go to the moon, or to spread democracy around the globe. Timothy Leary, who spent years in prison and was once called “the most dangerous man in America” by President Richard Nixon, went to his end a respected cultural figure in the employ of Madison Avenue. Jerry Garcia’s death was commemorated by congressional tributes and fawning cover stories in big-time glossies.

When Barack Obama solicited questions from the public on his presidential-transition Web site and allowed users to vote on the most popular, sixteen of the top fifty questions had to do with liberalizing drug policy. In the midst of war and financial collapse, the question voted most pressing asked whether Obama would legalize marijuana. The media ridiculed the result, but in doing so, they showed how much they misunderstand the importance we currently place on getting high in America. Today, huge majorities support legalizing marijuana for medical purposes, and almost half of Americans support legalizing it for everybody twenty-one and older.

Such widespread acceptance of exploratory drug use helped lead to the comeback of LSD, pot, and other hippie drugs in the nineties. The comeback stalled out just after Nichols and Smith chased Pickard through the Kansas countryside.

America, we like to boast, is an amalgamation of many different cultural strains. One class or community—say, impoverished southern

manual laborers—might be doing something completely different to get high from what another group—say, well-heeled northeastern hipsters—would do. Or it might not be: meth has been popular at the same time with both the trailer-park set and the urban gay community. Such odd similarities and stark differences reveal both something particular about a given socioeconomic milieu and something of the essential character of the American people.

In the late sixties Andy Warhol's New York scene was openly driven by meth; the drug only later infiltrated LSD-centered San Francisco. In the spring of 1966, Warhol's performance-art extravaganza/troupe of speed freaks, the Exploding Plastic Inevitable, accepted an invitation to play the Fillmore Auditorium in San Francisco, a legendary hippie venue. The result was a collision of drug cultures, reports Martin Torgoff in his book *Can't Find My Way Home: America in the Great Stoned Age, 1945–2000*.

"We spoke two completely different languages because we were on amphetamine and they were on acid," Warhol follower Mary Woronov told Torgoff. "They were so slow to speak, with these wide eyes—'Oh, wow!'—so into their vibrations; we spoke in rapid-machine-gun fire about books and paintings and movies. They were into . . . the American Indian and going back to the land and trying to be some kind of true, authentic person; we could not have cared less about that. They were homophobic; we were homosexual. Their women—they were these big, round-titted girls; you would say hello to them, and they would just flop on the bed and fuck you; we liked sexual tension, S&M, not fucking. They were barefoot; we had platform boots. They were eating bread they had baked themselves—we never ate at all!"

That disparity had more to do with cultural differences than with drug availability. Warhol and his band had ready access to all the LSD they could have digested, but it didn't fit as well with their lifestyle and values as meth did. The same type of choice was evident among the hippies: bennies and other forms of meth were there for those who wanted them, but the egoism and aggression that those drugs provoke didn't fit the counterculture ethos. Although drugs are often given credit for creating or driving a culture, sometimes it can be the other way around. When a culture can freely choose one drug over another, it will pick the one that fits best with its worldview.

So much has been written on drug use and American culture that it would take weeks to roll all of that paper up and smoke it. In much of that writing, the story of American drug use goes something like this: The party started in the sixties, got crazy in the seventies, and got out of control in the eighties, as greed and addiction took over. That was followed by a period of recovery and maturity. Yet America is not a rock band, and its real history wouldn't fit neatly on VH1. Very few popular authors bother to look at what drugs Americans themselves say they're on—which is a shame, because that information isn't hard to get. In addition to the University of Michigan's federally funded survey of teenagers, which has been going on since 1975, there's the feds' own survey of adult use, now called the National Household Survey on Drug Use and Health. There are also smaller surveys to which these can be compared, as well as data on arrests, seizures, and emergency-room admissions.

What the numbers reveal is that although things were indeed crazy in the seventies, things stayed crazy even after Americans supposedly sobered up. And while the standard drug narrative begins in the oh-so-wild late sixties, let's not kid ourselves. Future Americans were getting obliterated on their way to the continent, and perhaps no decade has witnessed as much better living through chemistry as the 1890s, a time when the movement against alcohol ushered in a buffet of modern highs.

The survey approach has a natural hindrance: not everybody wants to give the federal government detailed answers on illegal drug use. But there are ways to attempt to account for the "lie error" in surveys, and if a certain percentage of people were lying in 1975, it's safe to assume that a roughly similar percentage of people were lying in 2005. A recent study that drug-tested folks immediately after they took a drug-use survey found that the survey results were pretty accurate. Some people who had done drugs fibbed and said they hadn't, but some who hadn't done drugs lied and said they had. Both groups were very small, and they effectively canceled each other out.

However respondents might lie, though, surveys are always useful for reflecting drug trends. And because drug use is at once a private and a social affair, drug trends can tell us a lot about where we've been, where we are, and where we're going. A lot of smart people

have spent careers poring over these numbers, and the insights they've come to have often been overlooked. But the data have frequently been presented as if they had no cultural or social implications—as if, for example, cocaine just appeared out of nowhere or LSD simply vanished. A lack of cultural or historical context allows partisans on both sides of the drug-policy debate to fill the void with their own stories: the CIA introduced crack to the ghetto; take acid and you'll jump out a window.

In reality, there's no such thing as drug policy. As currently understood and implemented, drug policy attempts to isolate a phenomenon that can't be taken in isolation. Economic policy is drug policy. Healthcare policy is drug policy. Foreign policy, too, is drug policy. When approached in isolation, drug policy almost always backfires, because it doesn't take into account the powerful economic, social, and cultural forces that also determine how and why Americans get high.

Cultural movements change our drug habits; our drug habits alter our culture. In both cases, the results might not be apparent for years. Yet a sober look at them makes it clear that America's twisted relationship with chemically induced euphoria has left a trail of consequences that have been as far-reaching as they've been unintended.