

Pills, Powder, and Smoke: Inside the Bloody War on Drugs

With Antony Loewenstein

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Social Media Handles



[Antony Loewenstein \(@antloewenstein\) / Twitter](#)



[Antony Loewenstein \(@antloewenstein\) • Instagram photos and videos](#)



[Antony Loewenstein](#)



[Antony Loewenstein - YouTube](#)

Personal Website

- [Antony Loewenstein](#)

Associated Websites

- [Antony Loewenstein - Wikipedia](#)
- [Antony Loewenstein - IMDb](#)

[Profile](#) – pills powder and smoke inside the bloody war on drugs

Antony Loewenstein is an Australian/German independent, freelance, investigative journalist, author and film-maker. He's written for the *The Guardian*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *New Statesman*, *Al Jazeera*, *The New York Review of Books*, *Vice*, *Huffington Post*, *Salon*, *The Daily Star*, *Le Monde Diplomatique English*, *Foreign Policy*, *The National*, *Jacobin*, *The Independent*, *Electronic Intifada*, *Al Akhbar English*, *Dawn*, *Haaretz*, *The Nation*, *New Internationalist*, *Forward*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Australian*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *BBC World Service*, *Adbusters*, *Al Masry Alyoum*, *Juan Cole*, *Mondoweiss*, *Tehelka*, *+972 Magazine*, *TRT World*, *Open Democracy*, *Sydney's Sun-Herald*, *New Zealand Herald*, *Sydney Ideas Quarterly*, *The Australian Financial Review*, *Crikey*, *Melbourne's Age*, *Brisbane's Courier Mail*, *Canberra Times*, *Online Opinion*, *New Matilda*, *The Conversation*, *ABC Unleashed/The Drum*, *Amnesty International Australia*, *Green Left Weekly*, *Eureka Street*, *Kill Your Darlings*, *Tikkun*, *Adelaide's Advertiser*, *The Bulletin*, *Znet*, *Overland*, *Sydney PEN*, *The Big Issue*, *Counterpunch* and many others.

He's been a weekly columnist for *The Guardian*.

Antony contributed a major chapter to 2004's Australian best-seller, *Not Happy, John!* on the Middle East.

His best-selling book on the Israel/Palestine conflict, *My Israel Question*, was released by Melbourne University Publishing in 2006. A new, updated edition was released in 2007 (and reprinted again in 2008). The book was short-listed for the 2007 New South Wales Premier's Literary Award. Another fully updated, third edition was published in 2009. It was released in all e-book formats in 2011. An updated and translated edition was published in Arabic in 2012.

In 2005, he was appointed to the board of Macquarie University's Centre for Middle East and North African Studies and in 2006 became an Honorary Associate at Macquarie University's Department of Politics and International Relations.

He was a contributor to the 2008 Verso Books release, *A Time to Speak Out: On Israel, Zionism and Jewish Identity*.

His second book, *The Blogging Revolution*, on the internet in repressive regimes, was released in 2008 by Melbourne University Publishing, an updated edition in 2011, post the Arab revolutions, and an updated Indian print version in 2011.

His 2010 ABC Radio National feature documentary, *A Different Kind of Jew*, was a finalist in the UN Media Peace Awards.

He is a contributor to the 2011 book *My Favourite Teacher*, published by NewSouth. He has a chapter in the 2011 book, *On Utøya: Anders Breivik, right terror, racism and Europe*, on the nexus between Israel and the Right.

He's the co-editor, with Ahmed Moor, of *After Zionism* in 2012. A collection of the world's leading writers and thinkers on the Israel/Palestine conflict, the book outlines how the one-state solution can be achieved in the Middle East. He appeared at London's Frontline Club to discuss it.

He is the co-editor, with Jeff Sparrow, of *Left Turn* in 2012. Featuring some of Australia's leading progressive voices, the collection provides an alternative view on #Occupy, unions, Palestine, the media, war, climate change and other vital issues.

He is a contributor to the 2012 collection, *Loving This Planet*, edited by Helen Calcidott and published by The New Press, on the importance of Wikileaks.

He's co-author of the 2013 book *For God's Sake*, via Pan Macmillan, on the role of religion, faith and politics in society.

He released in 2013 the best-selling book *Profits of Doom* released in an updated edition in 2014, including a photography exhibition, about vulture capitalism and privatisation in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Haiti, Australia, the Asia-Pacific, the "war on terror" and beyond.

In 2015 he released a major new book, *Disaster Capitalism: Making A Killing Out Of Catastrophe*, out with Verso Books. It was out in paperback in January 2017. An Arabic edition was released in 2019 and it became a best-seller.

He wrote/co-produced a documentary with New York based film-maker Thor Neureiter, *Disaster Capitalism*, about aid, development and politics in Afghanistan, Haiti and Papua New Guinea. It was selected for the prestigious 2016 Hot Docs film festival. It was released in 2018, screening across the globe.

His book on the global “war on drugs”, *Pills, Powder and Smoke: Inside the Bloody War on Drugs*, featuring on the ground reporting from Honduras, Guinea-Bissau, the Philippines, the US, UK and Australia, was out in 2019 in Australia, the US and India and 2020 in the UK. It’s been translated into Slovakian.

He made a 2019 documentary for Al Jazeera English on abuse of the opioid drug tramadol in Nigeria and Africa, *West Africa’s Opioid Crisis*, with South African film-maker Naashon Zalk.

He appears in the acclaimed 2019 documentary, *This Is Not A Movie*, on the famous Middle East correspondent, Robert Fisk.

He’s the winner of the 2019 Jerusalem (Al Quds) Peace Prize, one of Australia’s leading peace awards.

He’s a contributor to the 2020 book, *A Secret Australia: Revealed by the Wikileaks Exposes*.

In 2020, he co-produced and co-wrote the podcast series, *The Conspiracy Virus* on Covid-19, vaccines and climate change, with journalist Olivia Rosenman.

In 2021, he made a documentary for Al Jazeera English, *Under the Cover of Covid*, on the threat to civil rights during a global pandemic, with UK film-maker Dan Davies.

He's the co-creator of *Twenty Years*, an artistic and journalistic project on the legacy of the post 9/11 Afghan war, with Melbourne-based artist Tia Kass and Afghans around the world. Launched in 2021, it'll take place in 2021 and 2022.

He co-founded *Declassified Australia* in 2021 with investigative journalist Peter Cronau to uncover Australia's often secretive relationships with the world.

In 2022, he started consulting and researching on a number of documentary films for *Al Jazeera Arabic*.

His next book, *The Palestine Laboratory: How Israel Exports The Technology of Occupation Around The World*, out in 2023, is about how Israel's occupation has gone global.

Antony is currently developing a number of documentary film projects.

He's represented by literary agent Zeitgeist Agency.

In 2019, he was appointed Visiting Fellow at the Australian National University's (ANU) Centre for Social Research and Methods.

He was a Research Associate at the University of Technology Sydney's Australian Centre for Independent Journalism and was a former current Global Associate at Sydney University's Sydney Democracy Network. In 2016, he was a Visiting Researcher in the Global Governance Research Unit at WZB, Berlin's Social Science Centre. In 2016, Antony was a finalist in the US-based, Kurt Schork Memorial Fund Awards in International Journalism.

He sits on the advisory council of the British-based Sri Lanka Campaign for Peace and Justice. He is the co-founder of advocacy group Independent Australian Jewish Voices and contributed to Amnesty International Australia's 2008 campaign about Chinese internet repression and the Beijing Olympic Games.

Antony appears regularly around the world on radio (including the *BBC*), TV (including *CNN*, *Al Jazeera English*, *Democracy Now!* and *ABC News24*), in public, writer's festivals (in Australia such as Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and every major literary festival in the country and overseas such as Indonesia, India, South Africa and New Zealand) and at universities (including Harvard) discussing current affairs, politics and media.

Pills, Powder, and Smoke: Inside the Bloody War on Drugs

Synopsis

Like the never-ending war on terror, the drugs war is a multi-billion-dollar industry that won't go down without a fight. Pills, Powder, and Smoke explains why.

The war on drugs has been official American policy since the 1970s, with the UK, Europe, and much of the world following suit. It is at best a failed policy, according to bestselling author Antony Loewenstein. Its direct results have included mass incarceration in the US, extreme violence in different parts of the world, the backing of dictatorships, and surging drug addiction globally. And now the Trump administration is unleashing diplomatic and military forces against any softening of the conflict.

Pills, Powder, and Smoke investigates the individuals, officials, activists, victims, DEA agents, and traffickers caught up in this deadly war. Travelling through the UK, the US, Australia, Honduras, the Philippines, and Guinea-Bissau, Loewenstein uncovers the secrets of the drug war, why it's so hard to end, and who is really profiting from it.

In reporting on the frontlines across the globe from the killing fields of Central America to major cocaine transit routes in West Africa Loewenstein reveals how the war on drugs has become the most deadly war in modern times. Designed and inspired by Washington, its agenda has nothing to do with ending drug use or addiction, but is all about controlling markets, territories, and people. Instead, Loewenstein argues, the legalisation and regulation of all drugs would be a much more realistic and humane

approach. The evidence presented in this book will persuade many readers that he's right.

Excerpt

“I began working on this book before Donald Trump had the faintest chance of becoming US president. It was conceived during the Obama years when there were some positive, albeit small, changes to the drug war in the US and globally. The rate of incarceration in US prisons declined, a handful of US states legalised cannabis without federal government censure, and, on the international stage, Washington was less belligerent about enforcing a zero-tolerance prohibitionist agenda.

These were significant departures from previous US administrations, and sent a signal globally that nations could explore alternatives to policies that had killed millions while enriching drug cartels and organised-crime gangs. Legalisation and decriminalisation were finally on the agenda. Uruguay was the first nation on earth to legalise marijuana in 2013. Canada was the first Western country to do so in 2018. In this book, I report from Honduras and Guinea-Bissau in West Africa, two nations that are at the centre of the US-led drug war, though they receive little media coverage. Honduras experiences some of the worst violence in the world outside a traditional war zone. The bulk of cocaine arriving in America and Europe transits through both these countries. As the white powder grows in popularity in Western capitals, it's the people of Honduras and Guinea-Bissau that feel it most acutely. I speak to the farmers, authorities, peasants, and victims of a war that they didn't start and have no idea how to stop.

The Philippines is also a focus, and has recently suffered a brutal war on drugs launched by its president, Rodrigo Duterte. More than 30,000 people have been killed since he took office in 2016, and the bloody streets of Manila are a salutary tale of what happens when state-sanctioned murder becomes official policy. How and why so many Filipinos back Duterte in his drug war is perhaps the most disturbing part of the story.

As the intellectual heart of the drug war, the US is a key battleground. I investigate how marijuana has gone mainstream, a reality that seemed impossible just ten years ago, while the state still implements a drug war that it knows will disproportionately affect people of colour and poor whites. The darkest policies of the Nixon and Reagan eras are rearing their heads again in the Trump age with demonised drug users back at the rhetorical heart of law enforcement, the Justice Department, and the DEA. I uncover some of the secrets behind the DEA and how it entraps vulnerable people in West Africa and Honduras.

In the UK and Australia, two US client states, there's a growing awareness that prohibition has failed to impede drug use or criminality, but political cowardice means that little is done about it. In Australia, I find some reasons for optimism — for example, safe injecting rooms are increasingly accepted by the community as a necessary tool in tackling addiction — but the authorities remain fearful of moving too fast on drug-policy reform in case they incur a tabloid media backlash. In Britain, with extreme austerity, soaring poverty, and hopelessness evident from the heart of London to Newcastle, it feels like generations of young people are being left to suffer amidst an influx of deadly drugs.

I detail the ways in which drug users increasingly access the dark net to shop for drugs as a safer way to source illicit substances. Alongside this positive development is growing research into and adoption of psychedelic substances such as LSD, ecstasy, and magic mushrooms to treat depression and other mental-health problems. Finally, the debate that's long overdue is slowly entering the mainstream: tangible plans to regulate and legalise all drugs. What was once considered radical and unrealistic has never been more important to discuss and implement.

I've picked these countries and themes because they reveal a cross-section of the drug war. I wanted to examine places that receive little mainstream media attention but play a huge role behind the drugs that are consumed nightly in such major cities as London, Sydney, New York, and Paris.”

Selection of Reviews and Interviews

[Book Review: Pills, Powder and Smoke: Inside the Bloody War on Drugs by Antony Loewenstein | LSE Review of Books](#)

US President Richard Nixon launched his ‘War on Drugs’ in 1971, calling illegal substance use ‘public enemy number one’. This mendacious campaign to demonise substance users was born of twin ambitions: to deflect blame for the failure in Vietnam onto soldiers using ‘evil drugs’ and away from Washington’s political and strategic short-sightedness, and to neuter Nixon’s domestic opposition (i.e. ‘the anti-war left and black people’). It implicitly meant tapping into subliminal western anxieties about modernity that have existed since the industrial revolution, anxieties that have

historically found expression in spasmodic moral panics about the use of certain substances. Yet if there have been prior 'Wars on Drugs', none has matched the scale and brutality of the one (or 'ones': the drug war is not a monolith) we currently find ourselves in.

Like any war, the human and economic cost strains comprehension: the US alone devotes some 50 billion US dollars annually to trying to suppress a drug trade collectively worth at least 500 billion US dollars, while addiction rates skyrocket, millions of the poor and marginalised are incarcerated and hundreds of thousands of civilians are murdered worldwide. Like any war, those who suffer have not been those who started it: the US-led global prohibition regime has sacrificed countless nations (Colombia, Peru, Mexico) on the altar of drug control, has funded repressive states into detaining the migrants that a militarised US drug policy has created and has weaponised the issue in order to further coercive domestic and foreign policies. And, like many a war, it has neither been a victory nor a defeat, but has instead benefitted the few at the expense of the many.

These are but some of the ideas contained in Australian journalist Antony Loewenstein's new book. *Pills, Powder and Smoke: Inside the Bloody War on Drugs* is an expansive medley of facts, figures and accounts of life in the midst of the drug war. Loewenstein travels to six countries on five continents: Honduras, Guinea-Bissau, the Philippines, the UK, the US and Australia.

As the author of *Disaster Capitalism*, he is refreshingly direct in his political and personal views, arguing that the entire drug trade should be legalised, regulated and preferably nationalised, with the state holding a monopoly on the production and sale of all drugs. Given the increasing corporatisation of the emerging cannabis industry (and of the nascent psychedelic industry), one can see why this last point is important.

Furthermore, he presents voices that challenge Manichean narratives of legal versus illegal markets, of state versus cartel. Two such voices are that of Mexican journalist-turned-academic Oswaldo Zavala and Italian journalist Roberto Saviano, the latter of whom has been under heavy police protection since 2006 after death threats from the Calabrian 'Ndrangheta. Through them, Loewenstein underlines the relationship between the global drug trade and capitalist financial institutions. It was the Head of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, Antonio Maria Costa, who famously admitted after the 2008 financial crisis that it was drug money, in the hundreds of billions, that saved many banks and kept the global financial system afloat – for only the cartels possessed the necessary liquidity. As Saviano writes, 'it's not the world of cocaine that must orbit around the markets, but the markets that must rotate around cocaine.'

Zavala in turn challenges the idea that Mexican cartels have overwhelmed the Mexican state – rather they mutually benefit from the drug war. There exists in that country a triangle between authorities, cartels and multinational corporations: the logic of the drug war allows Mexican administrations to grant multinationals access to natural resources, the cartels do the dirty work by forcibly displacing people from those areas and killing journalists and environmental activists, and authorities get payouts from certain cartels

in exchange for targeting their rivals (all while receiving US funding to fight the cartels). To some, 'Los Zetas' – one of Mexico's most vicious crime syndicates – are not a cartel but a paramilitary, performing the black ops missions the military can't do to further the interests of the mining, fruit and energy companies.

A different, though similar, triangle exists on the US side between politicians, certain state institutions and defence contractors: politicians get to be 'tough on crime' (and thereby deflect from other issues), certain state institutions (i.e. the military, law enforcement and intelligence agencies) can justify increased budgets and accrue political capital and defence contractors exploit new markets hungry for weapons and military technology. This practice has exacerbated armed conflict, human rights abuses and structural oppression in many countries in Central and South America. In his chapter on Guinea-Bissau, Loewenstein highlights concerns that America's greater focus in recent years on drug trafficking in West Africa is partly driven by the neoliberal capitalist desire to create a new market for 'military, surveillance and anti-terrorism hardware and software in the region'...

- [Pills, Powder and Smoke by Antony Loewenstein; Say Why to Drugs by Dr Suzi Gage – review | Society books | The Guardian](#)
- [The Volteface Interview with Antony Loewenstein: 'Pills, Powder and Smoke'](#)