

America's favorite radio commentator takes a long
look back at a national calamity

There Was a Nation . . .

By PAUL HARVEY

THERE WAS ONCE a nation founded upon the principles of reason and moral responsibility. Blessed with an industrious people and abounding in natural resources, it became one of the most prosperous and self-sufficient nations on earth.

Eventually, however, having grown accustomed to ease and plenty, too many of its people grew self-indulgent. Foreigners were quick to exploit this weakness by selling them illicit drugs.

Drug smugglers established their headquarters in a southern city. In a matter of years, their poison had seeped into virtually every town and village via a weblike distribution system that flourished under the noses of judges, politicians and police—sometimes even with their assistance, for drugs can corrupt anyone.

Some intellectuals initially extolled the psychic and medicinal benefits of drugs and minimized

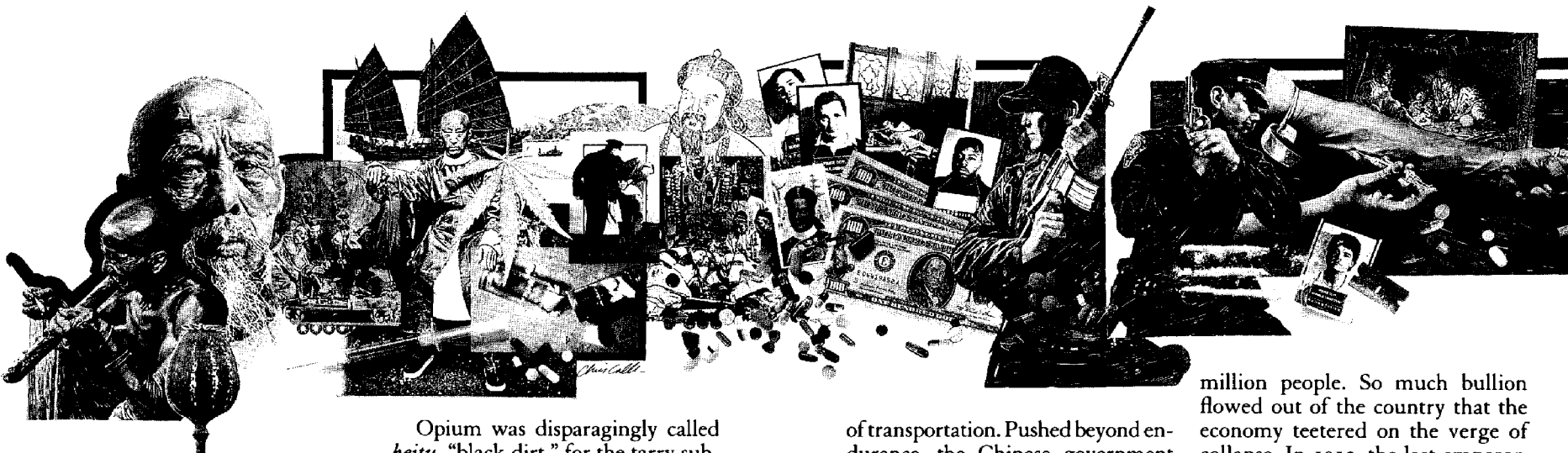
their harm. Ironically, these intellectuals, along with the rich and privileged, were the first to succumb. The army was next. The last, most tragic victims were the poor.

In the final stages of the plague, addicts whom drugs did not kill outright became susceptible to infectious diseases, which they unwittingly spread to loved ones.

And in time, this once great and noble nation was so withered that it fell victim to countries a fraction of its size.

Now, if you think this story is about 20th-century America—you're wrong. This is a capsule account of what actually happened to China in the 19th century.

In the early 1800s, China was among the wealthiest, most self-sufficient nations on earth. Its rulers had governed for centuries under an ancient system of ethics set down by the followers of Confucius. China's very name for itself,



Zhongguo, the "Middle Kingdom," underscored its glorious position between heaven and earth. Nothing could bring it down.

Except itself. Western nations ran up huge trade deficits with China to pay for porcelain, silk and tea. But China remained wary of outsiders and had little interest in purchasing foreign goods. Thus little could be done to redress the imbalance of trade . . . until Britain discovered China's secret taste for opium and began shipping it into the country from British fields in India.

The pernicious drug had been severely restricted by law in 1729, but as imports rose, some scholar-officials argued that opium should be "decriminalized" and its distribution regulated by the government. Others declared that it was beneficial to a weary psyche and cured stomach ailments.

Opium was disparagingly called *heitu*, "black dirt," for the tarry substance placed in long bamboo pipes. Addicts smoked it while stretched on benches in "dens" not too unlike today's "crack houses." In the early stages, opium induced euphoria. But habitual use left victims burnt-out husks of their former selves. In the final stages of addiction, it caused dementia and death.

And victims more and more included nonaddicts. As opium smokers gathered, coughing and spitting, they unknowingly became infected with, and then spread to others, diseases as deadly in those days as AIDS is now—tuberculosis and influenza.

At a time when such pressures as overpopulation, political infighting and declining revenues were also taking their toll, addiction raged through China's army and invaded the civil service. The effect was a rapid decline in provincial administration. Canals collapsed out of neglect, disrupting China's vital system

of transportation. Pushed beyond endurance, the Chinese government closed its doors to all foreign goods and destroyed crates of opium stored in British warehouses in Canton.

England declared war and its navy brutally defeated an inadequate Chinese fleet. As part of the treaty settling the "Opium War" of 1839–42, a shocked and demoralized China ceded the southern island of Hong Kong to Britain. This city, much like Miami, became the hub of the drug trade, from which criminal societies, like the Mafia today, joined forces with the foreign smugglers to disperse the drug everywhere.

Peasant discontent erupted into a massive civil war, called the Taiping Rebellion, which cost as many as 30 million lives. Taking advantage of the chaos, England, France, Germany and Russia carved up China like a ripe melon. By the end of the 19th century, five percent of China's population was addicted—over 22

million people. So much bullion flowed out of the country that the economy teetered on the verge of collapse. In 1912, the last emperor, Puyi, was forced from the throne.

China floundered in the bloody strife of civil war and foreign invasion for almost four decades. Then Mao Zedong's Communists crushed all opposition, taking another 30 million lives and forcing millions out of their villages and onto communes. Mao did away with the opium problem—by eliminating the smokers.

Only recently has China begun to stem its nearly two-century decline, which began with the first self-indulgent puff on an opium pipe.

HISTORY RECORDS a sad cycle: the great civilizations—Greek, Roman, Spanish and Chinese—fell by their own inner weakness before their military forces were vanquished.

And if the United States ever does succumb, here too it will have been by our own hand.

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