

The Breach 303: What Everyone Gets Wrong About the Opioid Crisis

Lindsay B.: Welcome to The Breach, your deep dive into authoritarianism and corruption in the era of Trump. I'm your host, Lindsay Beyerstein, and my guest today is Sanho Tree, director of the Drug Policy Project at the Institute for Policy Studies and a longtime critic of the war on drugs. The Breach is part of Rewire.news, your go-to site for news and commentary on health, rights, and justice.

Last week, Donald Trump abruptly announced that he was going to declare a state of emergency for opioid addiction, after all. He'd said he was going to do it in August, and then seemingly forgot about the whole thing. Now Politico reports that he's blindsided his advisers by telling everyone the plan is dropping this week. This is a problem because the key people Trump needs to design and implement such a plan have either resigned or failed to be confirmed. Tom Price stepped down as Secretary of Health and Human Services in September to seek help for his government jet travel addiction, and Representative Tom Marino withdrew his bid to head the Drug Enforcement Agency last week after the Washington Post revealed that Marino was a pawn of the drug distribution industry and a key player in passing a law the DEA claims is hobbling the agency's bid to stop the diversion of opioid pills to the black market, and the acting head of the DEA stepped down in September because he believed Donald Trump lacks respect for the rule of law.

Sanho, welcome to the program.

Sanho Tree: Pleasure to be here.

Lindsay B.: Everyone's talking about Scott Higham and Lenny Bernstein's investigative piece in the Washington Post about how big pharma got the better of the DEA, and the whole thing ended Tom Marino's aspirations to head the Drug Enforcement Agency. What do you think of the piece and the fallout from it?

Sanho Tree: I think it was a very useful and important piece. The industry has tremendous power in Washington. It's not just the DEA, however. It's the industry as a whole, the pharmaceutical industry and their lobbying power. It's not unusual. I think, though, my criticism of the piece is that it implies that the DEA knows what they're doing. Yes, those wholesalers were definitely problematic and engaging in all kinds of really bad activities, and driving this crisis, but the DEA's solution, however, is also in many ways equally shortsighted, in the sense that if you've ever heard the expression, if you go through life as a hammer, all the world's problems seem like nails. The DEA is the ultimate hammer in that sense. The idea is that they only go after supply over and over again, whether it's interdiction, eradication, or some form of drug prosecution. It really hasn't solved any of these problems, and in fact, can make the problem worse.

The time to have clamped down in terms of regulation would have been 15 or 20 years ago, when Purdue Pharma and these other companies were marketing these new opioids as being non-addictive. That should have been red flag number one. Their marketing practices have now been documented extensively, not just by the Washington Post and 60 Minutes, but the Charleston Gazette has done some

tremendous reporting on this, LA Times for instance, and now that, however, you have a full-blown problem, the DEA's solution was still to shut off supply. If you do that when you have a large population of people who are now dependent on these opioids, you're throwing them to the wolves. It's like throwing them into shark-infested waters saying, "Okay, you go out there now and deal with your addiction."

Many of them moved over to illicit drugs, to heroin. The heroin market since 2012 especially has been contaminated with lots of fentanyl and its analogs. Fentanyl is much, much, much more potent than heroin, and the analogs like carfentanil can be 10,000 times more potent than morphine. These are extremely dangerous drugs that are showing up on the street, the black market heroin, and I think it's absolutely irresponsible for the DEA to try to shut off the supply of still dangerous but at least legal and pure opioids, and throw these people to the wolves, and say, "Fend for yourself," because it really becomes Russian roulette once you're in the black market. It doesn't mean that everyone who is on prescription opioids moved to the black market, but many people did. This is why we're getting such a huge opioid overdose crisis today.

Lindsay B.: One thing that I thought was odd about the piece was that they had all these examples of horrible diversion that happened in the early 2010s, but then the law that they said is the most horrible thing only passed in the spring of 2016. There doesn't seem to be a lot of evidence in the piece that drug diversion has increased since the law was passed.

Sanho Tree: Yeah. Actually, I was a part of a focus group earlier this year. They never tell you who's funding a focus group, but you can piece together an idea of at least what industry it is and probably which side of the industry. Sure enough, this focus group turned out to be about distributors. Were you aware of the role of distributors? There are three or four big ones in this country that basically control that market. The focus group was about, how do we deflect upcoming criticism about this? They tested things like, it's a shared responsibility. How does this sound in the focus group? What about other scenarios of different wording? We have existing rules and regulations that should be enforced more, that sort of thing. How do you mitigate and deal with that spin?

It's not unusual. They knew this was coming, and the diversion problem has been going on for a very long time. Shutting down pill mills in Florida, for instance, which was a big problem, again, you can't do that without giving people safe alternatives, otherwise you're asking for trouble. Similarly with the situation in West Virginia, and a lot of that's on the border areas near Ohio and other states that are quite devastated by this problem, as well. They're shipping tremendous amounts of opioids to tiny towns that really have no business consuming that many. This was a clear case of diversion going on.

Lindsay B.: Why is the DEA unable to act when they see that two million opioid pills are being dropped into a county of 9,000 people?

Sanho Tree: Again, as the 60 Minutes piece made clear, they were running into a lot of opposition from higher political levels within DEA and in Congress. Of course, that's the industry flexing their muscle, protecting themselves. It's not unusual, but it is actually quite disgusting. If you want to look at how the revolving door works in Washington, again, a

lot of the DEA officials that had been in charge of enforcement during their careers were now working for the industry. This happens over and over again.

It's not uncommon to see commercials on late night TV, for instance, about IRS agents. "Are you having problems with the IRS? I have 30 years of experience in the IRS, and I will help you get around these laws." They did the same thing with pharmaceutical companies and the DEA. It also happens on a huge, much, much larger scale in the Defense Department and the Pentagon, that revolving door where you serve in your official capacity, and then you retire, and then you go and work for the industry because you know exactly which buttons to push and how to get around the regulatory obstacles that you were once in charge of enforcing. People change sides in this town all the time. It's very disheartening, and it should give us some warning about motivations.

Yes, the DEA did have a point about diversion and stuff, but they get rewarded on interdiction and eradication. Source control, that's their bread and butter, and that's what they do. Whether it's wise to do that at this point in this crisis ... After the horse has left the barn, it's too late to close the door. If you do close that door, you're opening people up to all these other indirect consequences, fentanyl and contaminated heroin, that sort of thing.

Lindsay B.: I feel like this story might be a chance to change the narrative around how the opioid addiction crisis spread. People have this stereotype. Even the media doing interviews with the journalists who did the expose seem to be assuming that it was well-meaning pain doctors addicting legitimate pain patients one at a time, and that's how we got so many addicts. This story seems to shed light on a whole new aspect of the problem that hasn't got nearly as much media play, which is there is and was diversion on an industrial scale, with these drugs going straight to the black market.

Sanho Tree: Yes, and they knew exactly which regions they were going after, as well. It's not to say that every patient who was prescribed lots of opioids eventually went onto the black market. If you're a parish priest, or if you're a professor or whoever, they may have developed a dependence, but it doesn't mean they necessarily went to heroin, the street drugs, but those people who did have connections to that world, that is to say they knew which phone calls to make because they associated with people who were in those circles, that was a much easier jump to make, and so that's what they did.

I think we need to look at the regions where these things were happening, as well. There is a whole field called the depth of despair. I think there's an interesting coincidence, not necessarily correlation but striking coincidence, of where the opioid crisis is hitting the hardest and where Donald Trump did very well electorally. I think a lot of opioids are a very useful way to numb the pain of your existence. If you don't believe that tomorrow is going to be a better day, if you believe that your best days are behind you, a lot of people turn inwards.

Opioids are a very soothing way to do that. It's like the softest pillow you've ever slept on, the warmest bed. It's easy to relive old memories, particularly fond memories. You can remember times during your childhood. You can recall that and relive it very vividly in your head, very often. There's a real seduction there of opioids.

I think ultimately we need to look at why people choose to self-medicate at such relatively high levels in our country, where the United States consumes half the pain medication in the world, basically, and address those underlying issues, which I think are rooted in issues of poverty, despair, and alienation. The latter two cut across class lines in very profound ways that we don't often want to talk about.

I think there is no substitute for building a healthy society. I think the hollowed-out regions of this country, where people are really hurting, and the economy has left them behind, and they don't have other things to look forward to, become much more susceptible. Ultimately, I think the best prevention measure I can think of is to give people a reason to look forward to tomorrow. When they lose that, all kinds of bad things happen. Not just drug dependence but all these other antisocial behaviors or destructive behaviors happen as well.

Lindsay B.: I think it's really interesting that the opioid system is engaged when we have social bonding, like between mothers and infants, or other human beings, and that people may be turning to opioids to replicate what they used to get through the normal social fabric of communities.

Sanho Tree: Yes. I think in particular we have evolved a world and life way that are not sustainable, that don't really make a lot of sense. It's inchoate, so people don't really know how to put a finger on it, but something is profoundly wrong. I, for instance, I'm always impressed when I visit indigenous communities around the world and look at the basics of what it takes to build a healthy community. I give great credit to any society that can replicate itself over six or seven generations. That's something we have not figured out how to do, because in terms of post-World War Two transnational modern capitalism, we don't have more two or three generations of data, and we don't know how sustainable this is. The early returns suggest that it's not sustainable at all, whereas for instance, my father went back to our ancestral village a few years ago, and brought back a copy of our family scrolls, the family tree. That thing went back. I knew it went back a ways, but I had no idea it went back 26 generations.

Lindsay B.: Wow.

Sanho Tree: We think to the year 637 or something like that. Mostly illiterate peasant farmers, but in a Confucian culture where you're taught to revere your ancestors, you record all that stuff down, or get someone who's literate in the village to write it down.

The reason I bring this up is that my life, and just the energy resources alone, I've consumed more than all of my ancestors combined simply because I live a modern lifestyle. I go to the local Trader Joe's here and I get a bag of organic spinach. It's \$1.69. I look at the label, and it was produced in China. Have we lost the ability to grow spinach in this country? Yet we ship this frozen across the world's largest ocean, across an entire continent, so I could save 10 cents on a bag of spinach.

How do you explain to the seventh generation, your great-great-great-great-great-grandchildren down the line, that, "Sorry, we destroyed the world and the environment,

but I saved 10 cents on this bag of spinach, and it made sense to do that." We don't think about these things anymore, and those life ways which had kept our communities and our societies stable over many generations have been eroded. We look around us, and we've created this world of silicon, petroleum, steel, and concrete, and we think, "This is normal. This is how things were meant to be. It could only have been this way."

In fact, we forget that this is how we arrived because of a series of choices that we made as a society, or refused to make because we've privatized and deregulated everything, so the market then decides for us what's best. We don't have elders anymore the way that traditional societies would have elders who say, "Maybe you want to think twice before doing this thing." The market decides, and the market doesn't care about the next generation. It cares about current profits and maximization of profits now.

Combine that with a political system where you elect people who are concerned about two, four, six-year election cycles, and as soon as they're elected, they think about reelection. Whose job is it to ask the big questions? The elders of the Iroquois Confederation used to ask, "How will the decisions we take today affect the seventh generation down the line?" That is good, holistic, long-term thinking. We don't have those people. We have elders. We've locked them in retirement homes and say, "What do you know? You're old." Yet there's tremendous wisdom there that we're not allowing to come to the surface.

We're careening. We're literally making this up as we go along in this world that we've created. Nobody knows if it makes sense or not, and I think a lot of drug use, in my global experience, is in some ways a logical response to a world gone mad.

Lindsay B.: It's interesting you mention the absence of elders and the status of elders in our culture. I think that might connect with the depths of despair. You've got these people who are in their 50s who in a more traditional society would have a revered place at the top of a clan. In our society, we've just got a narrative of decline, of obsolescence.

Sanho Tree: Yeah. In fact, the drug war's one of the most interdisciplinary issues I've ever worked on, and that's what makes it hard to solve. You can tie all kinds of issues, other problems, to this and look at how they interact. For instance, NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement that passed in the mid '90s. The technocrats who conjured up this treaty never thought about basic questions of how will people raise children who aren't used to these new realities.

If you look at, for instance, the cornerstone of rural Mexican life for centuries revolved around corn and the planting cycle of corn. Your songs or rituals, your ceremonies, your customs were very much rooted to the land and to this planting cycle. Suddenly, our technocrats say, "We can produce corn much more cheaply in the United States, and we can ship it to you. That'll free up your labor. They can work in sweatshops, maquiladoras, and that will develop your country." These technocrats never asked, how will these new parents raise children in a completely alien environment of petroleum, steel, silicon, and concrete? What songs will they teach them? What traditions? How will they teach them how to behave and sustain themselves over future generations?

It's the eternal story of the city mouse and the country mouse. Different cultures, and different ways of adapting. These kids have suddenly ... Both parents are working in factories or other jobs. They're at the lowest end of the socioeconomic ladder, so they have no status, and here come the narcos and the gangs, offering you instant respect. You get a gun and social mobility. You have cash for the first time. You now have an inexhaustible reservoir of what the Pentagon calls trigger-pullers willing to live as a king for a year or two rather than a pauper for a lifetime.

Those life ways that we destroyed through trade agreements come back to haunt us in other ways. I'm not saying there's a direct straight line necessarily all the time, but we're not even thinking about these dimensions, and it matters. That's where our elders I think really come in.

Lindsay B.: If we could just change gears for a moment, Donald Trump has announced that he's going to be meeting with the president of the Philippines, President Duterte, when he goes to Asia next month. He's praised Duterte's very brutal anti-drug policies that involve death squads. Can you recap what's going on in the Philippines and why we should be concerned about that?

Sanho Tree: Yeah. President Rodrigo Duterte was elected on a very tough on drugs platform. He vowed that he would kill so many people that the fish in Manila Bay would grow fat from their corpses. People thought, "He's just talking, just exaggerating." He actually set out to fulfill on his campaign promises. By some estimates, the death toll now since he took office end of last June ranges from 7,000 on the low end to about 13,000 on the high end. If you take that number, that amounts to basically killing more than one person every hour since he's been in office.

These are largely death squad killings or vigilante killings, and a smaller fraction is done by the police, where the police always say that the victim resisted arrest. They will often be shot, and they'll find handcuff marks around their wrists, and they'll plant the gun on the right hand when the shooter or the victim was actually left-handed. All these things, these patterns over and over again, of extrajudicial killings, and these vigilante death squads have been funded by the police. There's been lots of reporting and documentation of that, but they're slightly more deniable.

Earlier this month, President Duterte said, "Okay, fine. People are complaining about all these scandals and killings and stuff. I'm going to tell the national police to back off on the drug war, and I'm going to turn it over to the Philippine DEA. They've only got a little more than 1,000 field agents they can deploy versus the entire national Philippine police, so that's not going to sustain any of his programs in terms of his all-out war on drugs. What I think that's about, however, is the upcoming ASEAN meeting in Manila, which they're hosting. This is the 50th anniversary of ASEAN, the coalition of Southeast Asian nations.

Trump will be going there as well. I think a lot of domestic opposition should be credited for getting President Duterte to call off the national police, but I think it's also inconceivable that the Trump administration did not pressure the Philippine

government to say, "Lay off the drug war killings at least until the ASEAN meeting is over and Trump's visit is over," because otherwise, every other international news story is going to focus on death squads and these extrajudicial killings, and also the role of Donald Trump and his relations with the Philippines. Trump has been very controversial about this. One of the first international leaders he called, even before he was sworn into office, was President Duterte. He complimented him on the drug war, saying, "You're doing it right."

President Duterte responded in kind. He appointed the developer of Trump Tower Manila, of course there had to be a real estate connection here, as his special representative to the United States. This incestuous relationship has been going on for a while now, and it runs smack into the Emoluments Clause of the Constitution. Now Trump is going to go to Manila for the ASEAN meeting, and may have a private bilateral meeting with President Duterte. I think they want to be able to say, "That's the old drug war in the Philippines. They've called off the police, and things are cooled down now."

I think what it really means, in terms of operationally, is that it will be less uniformed police getting involved in these encounters and killing people, and more outsourcing to shadowy death squads, but also I think they'll probably ratchet down some of the killings up and through the mid-November meetings of ASEAN. After that, I think they'll go back up again, but I hope not.

Lindsay B.: I was reading a report from the Council on Foreign Relations about the situation, and they were claiming that the Philippines is overstating its drug problem, that they have added a couple million people to their roster of supposedly drug-addicted people.

Sanho Tree: Absolutely.

Lindsay B.: Can you talk about why that is, what domestic landscape they're obscuring with that?

Sanho Tree: Yeah. The Philippines has a big problem with methamphetamines, what they call shabu, which is usually smoked. It's usually consumed amongst the poorest of the population, and that's who's bearing the brunt of this drug war, but the drug use rates aren't that extreme relative to other countries in the region. President Duterte has this habit of exaggerating things beyond all recognition.

Before he took office, the Bureau of Dangerous Drugs in the Philippines estimated there were 1.8 million drug-dependent people or drug abusers, however they choose to define that. President Duterte, after he takes his office, claims suddenly that there are three million drug addicts in the country, and he famously boasted that, "Hitler killed three million Jews," those are his numbers, and he said, "I would be happy to kill three million drug users." Then later on, he inflates that number to four million, and then most recently, last month, the foreign secretary in New York gave a speech at the UN General Assembly where he claimed than suddenly the number was now seven million.

Something's not adding up here, and especially their policy of killing people isn't working if your numbers are multiplying that rapidly. Yes, there is a huge exaggeration going on in terms of numbers, but President Duterte has exaggerated all kinds of things.

For instance, one of the foundations this drug war is built upon is this lie where he says that if you smoke shabu for more than six months, your brain will shrink to the size of a walnut or the size of a baby's brain. People repeat this stuff, and they use it to justify the killings. They say, "There's nothing we can do. They're beyond redemption. They can't be cured, so you have to kill them." This is a very common perception.

The drug war, unfortunately, remains very popular, although he's starting to lose some support in the poorer demographics, because they're being targeted. It's still overwhelmingly popular in the Philippines, unfortunately. There's been no winds of reform blowing through there. When you have years and years of dehumanization of drug users, what's happening in the Philippines is a classical pogrom, if you will, like under Czarist Russia where they targeted Jews.

They're using drug users as a scapegoat. The term scapegoating comes from the Biblical era, where the priest or the rabbi would entrust the sins of a village literally onto a goat, and then drive the goat out of the village. Now they're clean. They're cleansed. What President Duterte has done here is basically take a cornucopia of social ills that are endemic to a very unequal and impoverished society, and take all those problems, and project it onto one group, the drug users, and say, "If we just got rid of them, everything would be wine and roses again." You have this scapegoating that's turned into a pogrom that is really based upon an eliminationist ideology.

Lindsay B.: Is he using these killings to kill other kinds of political enemies that might be threatening to him that might not even be involved in the drug trade?

Sanho Tree: That's harder to document, but certainly journalists have been targeted. The Philippines is one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists, and there are a lot of journalists who he considers his enemy for criticizing him. He's also abused human rights people. He said he wanted to behead some human rights critics. He says these things on camera. He's more Trump than Trump in that sense. Things that pop into his head come right out of his mouth.

Lindsay B.: It does sound eerily familiar.

Sanho Tree: Yes, exactly. Again, it's a very effective form of scapegoating. People are paying a very high price for it.

Lindsay B.: What do you think an effective drug policy for the Philippines would look like?

Sanho Tree: I think number one, there are lots of harm reduction principles that could be applied to this, but also, at the end of the day, just like the United States, there is no substitute for building a healthy society. You have to do something about this extreme inequality and to give people a reason to look forward to tomorrow. It's not that different from, for instance, when I used to look in east Baltimore back in the late '90s. I would come across communities that were completely devastated and with high rates of drug use. You see it in *The Wire*, *The Corner*. Those were those neighborhoods.

I would come across communities that had no jobs to speak of, no access to job training

programs, no transportation infrastructure to the suburbs where the jobs might exist, and I'd see politicians come into these communities and say, "Aha, I see what your problem is. Your problem is drugs. We'll give you more police. We'll prosecute these people. That'll solve your problems." You can't just say to these people, "No, you need to be sober and have no job and no hope and no future and no opportunity." That is not a workable or sustainable substitute for an effective drug control program, which involves building a healthy and just society.

Lindsay B.: Sanho, that's all the time we have for today. Thank you so much for coming on the program.

Sanho Tree: My pleasure. Thanks so much.

Lindsay B.: Now it's time for recommended reading, a handpicked selection to deepen your understanding of the current political moment. Today's selection is by Sean King in *The Intercept*, entitled *Kelly's Lies are Part of a Pattern of Not Believing Black Women*. Representative Frederica Wilson, a black Congresswoman from Florida, criticized the president's ham-fisted condolence call to a fallen African-American soldier's family. Trump called Wilson a liar, but she had witnesses to back up her account, because she and the family heard the whole thing on speakerphone.

Then Kelly was sent out to attack Wilson again. Instead of apologizing for his lying boss, Kelly assailed Wilson and the Gold Star family for the made-up offense of listening to a presidential condolence call on speakerphone. Then Kelly tried to smear Wilson as a loud, crass woman who bragged about money and her ties to President Obama at a solemn building dedication. Video of the event showed that none of this happened.

Now we've got two angry old white men berating three grieving black women rather than acknowledging their own inability to make a phone call and talk about feelings. This could be a metaphor for the whole administration. King argues that Trump and Kelly thought they could get away with these blatant lies because of our society's general unwillingness to believe black women and acknowledge black pain. That's it for recommended reading.

The Breach is produced by Nora Hurley for Rewire Radio. Our executive producer is Marc Faletti. Our theme music is *Dark Alliance*, performed by Darcy James Argue's *Secret Society*. I'm your host, Lindsay Beyerstein. Follow Rewire at [Rewire_news](#) for the latest on the issues that matter most. See you next week.