

ATW-26

The Green and the White - I. If This is Colombia, Where's the Cocaine?

Tucson, Arizona

March 20, 1974

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Scene: The international arrivals sections of Eldorado Airport, Bogotá, Colombia, one night in mid-December of last year. Passengers who have cleared customs enter the long hall of airlines through double doors and are met by porters, friends, and taxi drivers. The author is sitting nearby waiting to meet someone.

Enter: Through the double doors a man and a woman in their mid-thirties, Americans, non-hippies. The woman wears a long summer dress, the man Bermuda shorts -- inappropriate clothes for Bogotá's 8000-foot altitude. They might have just stepped off a plane from Miami. Both of them seem agitated. They look around, not sure where to go. The woman sees the author and walks up to him.

Woman: (breathlessly) Excuse me, do you speak English?

Author: Yes.

Woman: Well, we just got off the plane this minute. Can you tell us where we can get some cocaine right away tonight?

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When I first came to Bogotá in 1965, Eldorado Airport was

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less fancy but more hospitable. As soon as passengers cleared customs they were ushered to a round pavilion and served free cups of delicious coffee, compliments of the national coffee-growers association. Today, free samples of cocaine might be more to the point. A great many visitors to Colombia have cocaine uppermost in their minds, and it is said that the amount of money involved in its illegal export to the north makes it at least as important economically as coffee.

It is not surprising that many of the cocaine-seekers who come to Colombia are Americans. The popularity of cocaine in our country is at an all-time high. More importantly, its use has now invaded the world of the middle-classes, just as marihuana use did starting a decade ago. One consequence of this change is a growing campaign on the part of middle-class lawyers, doctors, and educators to convince the public in general and judges in particular that cocaine is much less harmful than our laws make it out to be. For example, a number of test cases are now pending in state and federal courts throughout the country which might result in removal of the drug from its usual classification as a narcotic (along with heroin and other opiates) and in a lowering of penalties for its private, recreational use.

Many persons who try cocaine in our country must wonder why it is so popular. It is a very expensive drug, often selling for as much as \$50 a gram or \$1000 an ounce. (The legal retail price in the pharmaceutical trade is \$25 an ounce.) Usually it comes as a crystalline powder in various shades of off-white. Some people shoot it intravenously like heroin, but the vast majority of users snort it. When snuffed up the nose it produces very quickly a strong sensation of numbness in the nasal passages and throat. Often, American black-market cocaine does little else, and it is curious that people pay so much money to have their noses numbed.

The trouble is that most cocaine is highly adulterated before it reaches the individual consumer -- usually with amphetamines, which stimulate by the nasal route as well as by

the oral route, and also with procaine and other synthetic local anesthetics that mimic the numbing action of the real stuff. Real cocaine, in addition to its local effects, provides a warm glow of physical and mental well-being, a feeling of energy and clarity without much of the body stimulation of amphetamines or caffeine. But this feeling is subtle and may require learning to perceive. Even with good cocaine, first-time users may not notice that they are high.

What cocaine seems to have going for it mostly is a powerful mystique. It is the rich man's drug, the drug of exotic decadence, a magic tool to prolong and intensify sexual experience. Moreover, the ritual of huddling together to snort precious grains of a forbidden delicacy has a certain romantic charm.

Until recently it was much easier to come across good cocaine in South America than in North America. I tried it perhaps a half-dozen times in the U.S. without ever feeling much beyond my nose and throat. Then, one afternoon in Cali, Colombia at the apartment of some American dealers and musicians who loved cocaine, I complained that I had never really felt high from it. "Wait till you try this," one of them promised, chopping up the crystals with a razor blade and arranging them in thin lines to be snorted through a rolled-up 100-peso note. I inhaled one line in each nostril, got the usual sensations, and then, unexpectedly, a strong feeling of strength and health that seemed to flow through my lungs into my chest and whole body. My mind became alert, calm, and clear, and I remained in that agreeable state for a couple of hours, after which I felt tired.

But that was two years ago. Today, much Colombian cocaine is as bad as most American -- a logical result of so many northerners coming down to score. My friend Jimmy, who knows his coke and has spent a lot of time in places where it is sold, tells me the quality of stuff on the Bogotá market has so declined in the past year that he is seldom tempted to buy anymore. "I've even seen it cut with borax," he says.

"These gringos come down here from New York and L.A. and think all they have to do is buy the first blow they see on the street, and it'll be better than anything they can get up there. And the Colombians have learned they can sell just about anything and get away with it."

One thing I have noticed about the many gringos who come to South America to buy and use cocaine is that very few of them have any knowledge or experience of the plant that provides the drug they enjoy. That seems to be true, also, of the South Americans who use and traffic in cocaine. Yet the coca plant -- "Mama Coca" to the early Spanish conquerers -- has been and is an honored presence in the everyday lives of millions of native peoples of the New World. Its therapeutic values so impressed Europeans that they carried its use enthusiastically from the high Andes to their own continent. Only in this century has coca fallen into disuse among Europeans and Americans. And that disuse has been accompanied by increasing use of cocaine, the so-called active principle of the coca leaf. In these letters I will present observations that point up distinct contrasts in the effects of coca and cocaine and will suggest that all of us might benefit by paying more attention to the living shrub whose leaves were sacred to the Incas.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Andrew T. Weil". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the typed name.

Andrew T. Weil