

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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The Green and the White - IV. The Honor That is Due Her

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:

According to Indian tradition, coca was a gift from heaven to better the lives of people on earth. Over the years South American Indians have found the leaf beneficial in numerous ways. Aside from its ability to clear the mind, elevate mood, and make energy available, it appears to exert good influences on many physical functions. For example, it tones and strengthens the entire digestive tract, probably enhancing the assimilation of foods. A hot water infusion of coca sweetened with a little raw sugar (called agua de coca) is an excellent remedy for indigestion and stomach ache that was widely used even by non-Indians throughout South America until relatively recently.

Coca appears to maintain the teeth and gums in a good state of health; it keeps teeth white. The leaf is rich in vitamins, particularly thiamine, riboflavin, and C. An average daily dose of coca leaves (two ounces) supplies an Indian of the high sierra with much of his daily vitamin requirement. Coca appears to have a beneficial influence on respiration, and is said to effect rapid cures of altitude sickness. It also rids the blood of toxic metabolites, especially uric acid. Indians say that regular use of coca promotes longevity as well.

When European doctors carried coca back to their continent,

Andrew Weil is an Institute Fellow exploring the achievement of altered states of consciousness in our own culture and others.

they were able to confirm many of the therapeutic powers attributed to it and prescribed it widely to patients. Proprietary tonics based on coca became extremely popular. Our own Coca-Cola is an emasculated descendant of one of these 19th Century preparations.

My personal experiences with coca leave me convinced that the leaf is pleasant to consume and moderately stimulating in a useful way. It does not appear to be associated with dependent behavior or to provoke development of tolerance. It can be left alone if one chooses.

By contrast, cocaine is much less pleasant to consume, easily becomes associated with dependent behavior, is not very useful, and is very hard to leave alone. Yet in our society a great many people are using cocaine, and hardly anyone has seen a coca leaf. How have we managed to create such a situation?

Drug abuse is much more than the use of illegal and disapproved drugs by some members of society. It is the whole mentality that leads a society to make available to its citizens worse drugs rather than better ones, and many of us contribute to that mentality. The pharmacologist who teaches that coca and cocaine are equivalent, the physician who esteems synthetic white powders above natural green preparations, the judge who believes that cocaine is used mainly in combination with heroin are all as much responsible for unwise use of drugs as the user who takes cocaine in excess.

Throughout all of the argument as to why people use illegal drugs, we sometimes fail to notice the obvious: that people tend to use whatever is available. Over the past eighty years, everything we have done as a society to "protect" people from potentially harmful drugs has served to make worse preparations more and more available. The situation with cocaine is a paradigm of the process.

If a demand for a drug exists, it will be supplied. The demand for cocaine in our country is high, and black-market

traffic in it will grow. There is no chance of curtailing the use of cocaine by trying to cut off the flow of it or by punishing users and sellers. But there might be a chance of trying to interest users in coca and thereby encouraging them to shift their attention to something distinctly better.

On returning from the Amazon, I shared my coca with a number of cocaine-users. All of them liked it and some said they would like to use it instead of cocaine. Of course, I told them a lot about the leaves in advance so that they chewed them with a good set. Set and setting are especially important in shaping reactions to natural drugs like coca.

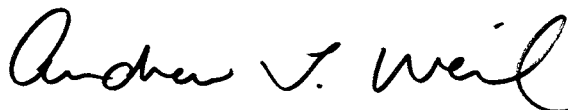
Ignorance about coca is widespread. Not only have few cocaine-users ever seen a coca leaf, many of them do not even know that coca exists. Some people who have heard of coca confuse it with cacao, the source of chocolate and cocoa. I have met almost no American physicians who are knowledgeable about coca.

I have often written that mental states triggered by drugs are latent in our own nervous systems and may be elicited by a variety of non-pharmacological methods. But I do not think it is reasonable to expect most people to be able to do without pharmacological aids. The use of drugs in our country is very great, and many of the legal ones, such as alcohol, tobacco, coffee, and tranquilizers, cause more social and medical trouble than some of the illegal ones. It is unrealistic to think we can make drugs go away. But we can teach people how to use them in better ways. One step in that kind of education would be to explain that natural drugs are less of a problem than isolated active principles and that certain natural drugs, like coca, are beneficial if used occasionally and with respect for their power.

The Indians I know who use coca respect their drug. They honor Mama Coca by treating her plant reverently, preparing it

for use carefully, and guarding its power by saving it for occasions when they need it. The essence of drug abuse is nothing more than failure to honor the wisdom and power of Nature, who has provided us with remedies of great efficacy to sustain us through the toils of day-to-day existence.

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

In collecting information for these letters, I received needed help from the following persons:

Dr. Jesús M. Idrobo of the Instituto de Ciencias Naturales of the Universidad Nacional, Bogotá, Colombia;

Msgr. Bermino Correa Yepes of the Prefectura Apostólica, Mitú, Colombia; and

Dr. Richard Evans Schultes of the Harvard Botanical Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Readers interested in further information on coca will find an excellent bibliography in the Martin article in Economic Botany cited earlier.

Received in New York on March 21, 1974.