



Debates over this question—by historians, healthcare workers and politicians—have been influencing North America’s ever-evolving drug policies since the start of the 20th Century.

For many people, it makes sense that a surge of drug addiction follows the return of soldiers who’ve been physically and mentally traumatized by war. The idea is that, during war, soldiers are often exposed to powerful substances, and once they start using them, to relieve pain or stress, they can’t stop. When they return home, they bring their drug problems with them and spread them among ordinary citizens, causing social decay and disorder. But a growing number of people insist there is a lack of actual evidence to support such claims, suggesting there are political reasons for exaggerating the “war and drugs” relationship.

The idea that war causes drug addiction blossomed in the early 1900s in the United States. In the lead up to the passing of a national drug law, some politicians claimed the Civil War was responsible for widespread opium use in America and that action was needed to address this.

Historians of the day picked up on the idea and began using the term “soldiers disease” to describe what they claimed had been rampant morphine addiction after the US Civil War. They explained that opium and its derivative, morphine, were widely used to ease the suffering of thousands of traumatized and wounded soldiers on both sides of the conflict, many of whom required surgery or amputation in the field. It made sense, they argued, that in the years following the Civil War, traumatized soldiers struggled with continued dependence on opium or morphine.

The only problem was the lack of evidence. Besides a few letters from former soldiers, there was almost no mention of morphine addiction among veterans in the post-Civil War period. Some historians have claimed the lack of evidence is understandable given that it wasn’t until decades after the Civil War that the idea of “addiction” as a medical disease requiring treatment (as opposed to a moral weakness) emerged and became a mainstream way of understanding drug use problems. For this reason, drug addiction doesn’t appear in the hospital and prison records after the war.

But other historians wonder if there's a simpler reason. Is it possible that drug addiction was not in fact a significant social worry among ex-soldiers, now safe in their home environment, away from the battlefield and daily threat of death? And, if battle trauma caused addiction, why was it that women—who never participated in battle—struggled with opium dependency more than men?

Or, is it possible that various factors were involved? One historian, for instance, suggests widespread chronic diseases (e.g., malaria and dysentery) and despair among Southerners over the destruction of their way of life after the Civil War contributed to opium use. With respect to the latter motive, an opium dealer in 1877 commented: “men once wealthy, but impoverished by the rebellion, have taken to eating and drinking opium to drown their sorrows” (*New York Tribune*, 10 July 1877 cited in Courtwright, 1983).

By the 1970s, opium-based drugs such as heroin were widely believed to be highly and immediately addictive, and it was considered next to impossible to quit using heroin for very long, even after intensive treatment on “narcotics farms.” So, news of widespread heroin use among soldiers in the Vietnam War sent a new wave of fear over North America. US President Nixon officially declared a “war on drugs,” in line with other initiatives to stamp out what he called permissive attitudes and behaviours that had been steadily eroding America values and pride throughout the 1960s. The Nixon administration also blamed heroin for the troops’ poor performance on the battlefield (and, ultimately, for losing the war itself). The President braced his nation for the return of thousands of drugged-out soldiers by stepping up drug enforcement initiatives and setting up addiction treatment programs, vowing to clean up America.

But, according to a study conducted in the early 1970s, the droves of “drug-enslaved” soldiers never materialized. When they returned to the United States, nearly all of the soldiers who had used heroin in Vietnam quit on their own and without treatment. Moreover, one argument contends the notion of an “an addicted army” and the anti-drug measures initiated by the Nixon administration were intended to help divert attention away from the many factors that contributed to the failure of the war in Vietnam and the unpopularity of the war at home in America. Likewise, the anti-drug laws of the early 20th century may have had more to do with addressing social fears about various minorities than about drug addicted veterans.

