



By: Timothy Snyder

The war on fentanyl - how to stop the big lie in time?



When announcing an aggressive policy, US President Donald Trump typically offers some grotesque justification – a nonsensical fiction that is supposed to stick in our minds as a rationale for violence.

The more we swallow these lies now, the harder it will be to question future falsehoods, because that would challenge our view of ourselves as intelligent beings.

This is the magic of the Big Lie, as Hitler explained in Mein Kampf: Tell a whopper so outrageous that people simply cannot believe it is untrue.

Hitler's biggest lie was to claim that an international Jewish conspiracy was the source of Germany's woes – a scapegoat that could be blamed for any problem and absolve others of any responsibility.

In 1939, Hitler and his propagandists spread blatant falsehoods about Poland as well – that it did not really exist as a state, and also that it was the aggressor that had triggered World War II.

Trump's big lies are almost too numerous to count. Perhaps the most versatile is that his policy focus is on curbing the illicit fentanyl trade.

Early in his second term, Trump claimed that **Canada attacked the United States** first by allowing fentanyl to flow freely across the border. And really, shouldn't it become the **51st US state**?

This complaint was a pretext for imposing tariffs on Canadian exports. But when Trump lumps Canada and Mexico together and claims that fentanyl is "pouring in" across the borders with both countries, he is lying.

In 2024, only about 0.2% of the **fentanyl** seized by US border authorities came from Canada, which was not even mentioned in the US Drug Enforcement Administration's 2024 **National Drug Threat Assessment**.

The attacks will not stop the flow of fentanyl

But in the past few months, the Trump administration has constructed an even more sinister geopolitical fantasy: military strikes on small boats in international waters are necessary to deter drug smuggling.

These attacks, which many experts view as patently illegal, have been clustered off the coast of Venezuela and have **killed at least 61 people** so far.

Although it is widely recognized that the attacks will not stop the flow of fentanyl into the US, **Trump has said** that his government will continue "to kill people that are bringing drugs into our country."

This display of military power is intended to serve as political spectacle

The extrajudicial killing of alleged narcotics smugglers is less about drug trafficking and more about power projection – and maybe even regime change.

Although videos of the bombings have become social-media fodder, there is no evidence that the targets were drug traffickers. (In fact, Vice President **J.D. Vance** **joked** in September about killing innocent fisherman, saying that he "wouldn't go fishing right now in that area of the world.")

Moreover, the Trump administration has reportedly authorized covert **CIA action** in Venezuela and deployed its most advanced **aircraft carrier** to the Caribbean Sea.

This display of military power is intended to serve as political spectacle. The danger is that that it could escalate into an unwinnable, open-ended conflict.

The opioid crisis

The tragedy is that the opioid crisis has been an essential element of the American experience for the past quarter-century.

The US has the world's highest rate of **opioid deaths**, owing largely to the profit-driven "health-care" system that guides people toward pain medication but does not incentivize the intensive, long-term care required to treat addiction.

The **crisis began** because of a money-making scheme by **Purdue Pharma**, the US pharmaceutical company that developed and aggressively marketed the popular opioid painkiller OxyContin.

While OxyContin was responsible for the initial rise in **overdose deaths**, many users turned to heroin and now fentanyl – which is some 50 times more powerful than heroin – when they could no longer obtain a prescription for Purdue Pharma's bestselling product.

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Trump and Vance are attuned to the **opioid epidemic**, in the sense that they see the wellspring of misery as a political resource that can be directed against an enemy of choice – whether an ally like Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney or an adversary like Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro.

In his 2016 memoir *Hillbilly Elegy*, Vance recounts how his mother, a nurse with easy access to prescription drugs, was **addicted to pharmaceuticals**.

But his political messaging on immigration and security has spun a different story, with Vance

blaming other countries – “the poison coming across our border” – for her travails. It follows that Americans must view their addictions as an attack from outside.

Lies work because they shift blame

It is important to understand the psychology Trump and Vance are exploiting.

Addicts tend to blame others for their condition. The rise of the far right in US politics has elevated this mindset to a national platform.



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The belief that someone else must be responsible for the country's problems has come to inform foreign policy, with the Trump administration concocting ever more absurd stories, for example that each strike on a Venezuelan boat **saves 25,000 American lives**.

Lies work because they shift blame. Holding other countries responsible for the opioid crisis is an attractive form of moral outsourcing for Americans.

But fiction on such a grand scale requires an entire alternative reality to be constructed around it.

Trump and his administration are training the press and the American public to associate the boat strikes with stopping the flow of fentanyl and other drugs – a prime example of the

falsehoods that imperialists tell before launching doomed wars of choice.

Wars begin with words, which implies that words must be taken seriously before conflict erupts. Only by calling out the big liars and telling the small truths can we have any hope of restraining Trump's increasingly aggressive presidency.

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