

whose specialized skills were essential to recovering lost or stolen money were dismissed. Paper trails suddenly stop. The more flamboyant criminals, such as Keating, were brought to book, but other, perhaps more cunning, perhaps better connected, and certainly less conspicuous, slipped the net. And, as the authors themselves discovered, the RTC was a very nervous place.

"Before the meeting had even started," they recount, "the senior official burst into the room. He proclaimed that he had ordered us not to pursue certain lines of inquiry with the data from his office and that we had disobeyed. . . . We soon learned that this official had contacted our funding agency to insist that we stop analyzing data that had led us to the 'forbidden' lines of inquiry." To the academic investigators, this suggested nothing, except perhaps that the high official had experienced a difficult childhood; undaunted—and, more to the point, incurious—they proceeded on their way. They counted beans. The beans were provided by a federal agency that remarkably few serious investigators trust any farther than they can throw it. Here is the fruit of their labors. The definitive book about the S&L crisis remains to be written.

L.J. DAVIS is a contributing editor of Harper's magazine and a contributing writer to Mother Jones.

The Corner Drugstore

by Steve Bogira

WHAT IS CLEAR ABOUT THE drug war is that nothing so far has worked. Despite billions spent mainly on cops and prisons, the dealing on inner-city streets persists.

"Against all the sanction we can muster, this new world is surviving, expanding, consuming everything in its path," write David Simon and Edward Burns. It's time to go back to square one, they say, to "shed our fixed perceptions" and take a fresh look at the problem "from the inside."

Which is what Simon and Burns give us in telling detail in *The Corner*, a look at drug dealing on the streets of West Baltimore, told from the point of view of the users and dealers them-

selves. One of the "fixed perceptions" the authors challenge is the idea that those involved in the drug life have mainly themselves to blame—that they freely chose to use or deal. Consider the book's main character, 15-year-old DeAndre McCullough. DeAndre grew up on a street where voices day and night chime out "Killer Bee," "Lethal Weapon," "Tec Nine," or whatever brand of heroin or cocaine is being hawked that day. Gaunt figures stumble down to the corners to cop. DeAndre's mother is one of these. Others slink into abandoned, urine-stinking row-houses to fire home their dope. His father is one of these.

DeAndre lives with his mother and younger brother in an 8' x 10' room in a three-story rowhouse. Various uncles and aunts, most of them addicts like his mother, inhabit the

rest of the building; the hallways are heavily trafficked by dope fiends. When DeAndre ends up on the corner, slinging packages and vials, is it really that surprising?

He should be in school, of course; he should be thinking about tomorrow. But people are dropping dead at a young age all around him—from bullets, overdoses, and the Bug. Maybe he'd think more about his future if it were clear he had one. DeAndre makes money quickly on the corner, and spends it just as fast, on name-brand clothes, marijuana, and Happy Meals. But the corner

offers more than money, the authors write; its people are also "cultivating meaning in a world that has declared them irrelevant. . . . In this place only, they belong. In this place only, they know what they are, why they are, and

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By David Simon and Edward Burns

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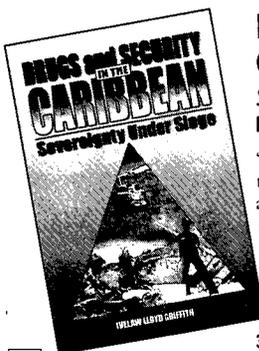
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what it is that they are supposed to do. Here, they almost matter?"

Anthropologist Elliot Liebow noted a similar quest for meaning on inner-city streets 30 years ago in his classic, *Tally's Corner*. "The desire to be a person in his own right, to be noticed by the world he lives in, is shared by each of the men on the street corner," Liebow wrote, of the men he studied on a corner in Washington, D.C.

To the extent that things have changed on the corner in three decades, it has not been for the better. Liebow studied men, because that's who was on the corner at the time. But in the mid-'80s, cheap cocaine lured women out there as well—to buy, and then sometimes to sell, to support their new pastime. With mothers as well as fathers addicted, discussions about single-parent families in the inner city have become dated, Simon and Burns point out, as vast numbers of children today are "in reality, parentless."

Soon these kids were on the cor-

ners too—"drawn not only by the quick money, but by the game of it," the authors write, "... playing gangster, selling vials, and ducking the police." Selling drugs has become a "rite of passage" throughout inner-city Baltimore.

With kids doing much of the slinging, gone is the discretion dealers once showed. These days, they stand on the corner caressing their bankrolls—"begging for the attentions of a knocker [plainclothes cop] or stickup artist." They hawk their product to passing cars, and serve almost anyone. The occasional violence necessitated by the business used to be limited and planned; now it's often "some manchild with hurt feelings waving a .380 around and spraying bullets up and down the block," with bystanders paying the price.

Simon, whose first book, *Homicide*, chronicled a year in the life of Baltimore detectives (and led to the TV series of the same name), and Burns, a former Baltimore police detective himself, describe the debasing effect all this has had on police

work. "Stupid criminals make for stupid police ... a valuable bit of precinct-level wisdom that the Baltimore department ignored as it committed itself to a street-level drug war," the authors write.

Police work has degenerated to "fish-in-a-barrel tactics," Simon and Burns say, and investigation and procedure have become foreign concepts to a generation of cops. "Why become adept at covert surveillance when you can just go down to any corner, line them up against the liquor store, and search to your heart's content?"

Not that the arrests of these small-time pushers slacken trade on the corners. Even officer Bob Brown, a legendary drug buster in West Baltimore, makes but a momentary impact. Brown has been patrolling the neighborhood streets for two decades. He knows every inch of his beat, and most of the players by name. He is surely what police officials and neighborhood associations have in mind when they proffer community policing as the newest weapon against crime. Yet though Brown has "fought tenaciously, clearing corners, herding fiends, chasing slingers, and arresting hundreds every year," Simon and Burns say, the working-class neighborhood where he began his career has become "little more than a collection of open-air drug markets and crumbling shooting galleries." Brown descends on the neighborhood one evening, filling his wagon with a half-dozen corner denizens. His efforts this particular evening bring a halt to the dealing on the corners—for exactly as long as he's there. "Shop open," a dealer declares, as soon as Brown's wagon is out of sight.

Simon and Burns give us full portraits instead of caricatures, the result of their willingness to stay close to their subjects for more than a year. (Trailing dope fiends and dealers is not an easy task; once, while walking down the street with DeAndre's father, Gary, the authors and Gary were shoved into an alley and robbed by three young men armed with a pistol and a hunting knife.) The people of the corner are obviously not saints, but as the authors show, most are not sociopaths either; they want a better life for

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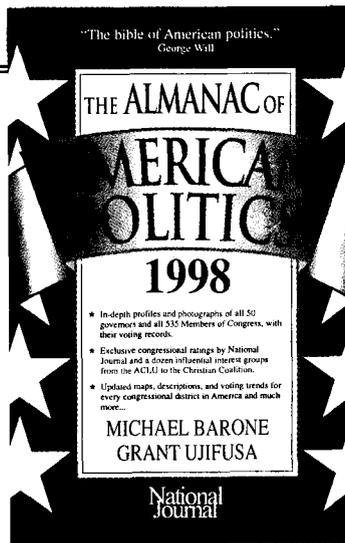
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themselves and their kin.

With the help of treatment programs, DeAndre's mother, Fran, manages to get clean sometimes. But while treatment cures the physical addiction, it doesn't change what Fran has to return to—a neighborhood where once you hit bottom, the only way to go is sideways. And the corner soon sucks her back.

Gary's attempts at kicking are likewise doomed. He is not proud of what he is. Lost in thought after holding DeAndre's son—Gary's first grandchild—for the first time, Gary says: "When you're young, you think

about what it is that you want to be—you think of all the things there is. And you wonder what it is you should wish for." Tears trail down his cheeks, as he continues: "I'm a drug addict. That's what I am. Who would wish for that? Who would choose that for their life?"

The debate over legalization of drugs misses the point that *The Corner* makes clear. For the problem isn't really what's happening on the corner. The problem is what's not happening elsewhere. Legalization might take the profit out of street dealing, and strip glamour from the pushers. But the

more complicated challenge of creating an alternative for people like DeAndre—a meaningful role for them in our society—would stubbornly remain.

STEVE BOGIRA writes about crime and poverty for the Chicago Reader.

Saving the Sentinel

by Marvin Kalb

MY FAVORITE STORY FROM this thoroughly absorbing book concerns the eminent 19th-century transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau. One day Thoreau was approached by a reporter with the breathless news that a new technology called the telegraph had just been tested successfully. "The president of the United States," the reporter announced, "sent a message to the mayor of Baltimore in a matter of minutes." Thoreau considered the news carefully and then asked, "What did the president say?"

Stanley E. Flink, the author of *Sentinel Under Siege*, and a former journalist who is now an adjunct associate professor at New York University, uses the story to underscore the continuing importance of words in journalism and history. We may all be absorbed with flickering images on televisions, but words, he stresses, are "the voices of memory." They convey the essence of history.

Flink has produced a valuable, well-written, and magnificently researched book. The subtitle suggests its scope—a tour of the triumphs and troubles, the bumpy contours of American journalism, from its protected origins in the Bill of Rights to the bustling uncertainties of the current world of mega-mergers, collapsing professional ethics, ferocious competition, and the World Wide Web. "The free press," Flink writes, "is facing a time of crisis."

Indeed it is, and one reason appears to be the rise of television as "the preponderant news source" for the overwhelming majority of Americans. Flink, who has worked for Life, CBS, and NBC, is clearly of the view that

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