The campaign between 2000 and 2005 to eradicate opium in Laos was accompanied by a discursive crusade by the Lao government and UN agencies to demonise opium as a cause of poverty. An approach that focuses on political reasons for this campaign fails to explain adequately its obsessive and uncompromising nature. Rather this seminar paper explores the symbolic aspects of the campaign which attribute a powerful agency to opium as a major obstacle to ‘development’. The paper also provides comparative evidence from the wider region that challenges the assertion that opium causes poverty and argues that the persistence of poverty among opium-cultivating highlanders of northern Laos is a consequence of interconnected state development policies, including opium eradication itself.