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Unsavory Bedfellows

Washington's International Partners in the War on Drugs

by Ted Galen Carpenter

Executive Summary

The United States has made common cause with an assortment of dubious regimes around the world to wage the war on drugs. Perhaps the most shocking example was Washington's decision in May 2001 to financially reward Afghanistan's infamous Taliban government for its edict ordering a halt to the cultivation of opium poppies.

Unfortunately, the fiasco with the Taliban was not an isolated example of U.S. collusion with unsavory governments. Throughout the 1980s U.S. officials heaped praise on Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega for his alleged commitment to the war on drugs. A decade later Washington did the same with Peru's authoritarian president Alberto Fujimori. U.S. leaders have been so obsessed with advancing the drug war that they have repeatedly cooperated with regimes that they have otherwise treated as pariahs. Thus, Washington has cooperated with Burma's military junta and Cuba's Fidel Castro on drug policy even as it maintained economic embargos against both countries.

Such collusion reflects the frustration and desperation of U.S. officials as they have sought to stem the flow of illegal drugs into the United States decade after decade without meaningful, lasting success. Instead of accepting the reality that a prohibitionist strategy is inherently futile, U.S. administrations have compromised important American values and helped strengthen corrupt, repressive governments. Ironically, most of the regimes with which the United States has cooperated have not even been sincere in their anti-drug activities. In fact, they have usually been deeply involved in the drug trade. Ominously, the Bush administration may be heading down the same path with Colombia's new president, Alvaro Uribe. U.S. officials are effusive in their praise of Uribe, even though there are serious questions about some of his political supporters. Given the mistakes Washington has made with other foreign leaders, greater caution would be advisable.

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Introduction

U.S. officials have frequently cooperated with regimes on the drug issue even when Washington has treated those regimes as pariahs on all other issues. A graphic example of that dual approach occurred in May of this year when a senior member of the military junta ruling Burma, Col. Kyaw Thein, came to Washington for discussions with Bush administration officials on ways to improve his government's efforts to eradicate illicit opium production. Kyaw met with Assistant Secretary of State Rand Beers as well as officials of the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Justice and Treasury Departments, and the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy.[1]

Kyaw's visit was curious on multiple levels. He was a prominent figure in the junta that had strangled Burma's aspirations for democracy and had harassed the leader of the democratic forces, Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, for years. That mistreatment had included placing her under house arrest for nine months—an episode that had just ended in early May. Kyaw's visit was a departure from the ban imposed in 1996 on visits to the United States by high-ranking members of the junta. Indeed, Kyaw had been specifically named as being ineligible to receive a visa. Yet, to discuss drug policy, he was now welcome in Washington. His visit could not even be interpreted as a reward to Burma's military leaders for releasing Suu Kyi. Administration officials conceded that the visit had been planned for weeks—long before Suu Kyi's release.[2]

Yet the administration also emphasized that the extensive talks with Kyaw did not herald a loosening of the economic sanctions that had been imposed on Burma. Cooperation was to take place on the drug issue, and the drug issue alone.

That was not the first time that U.S. officials had sought to make an exception to general policy toward Burma in the name of waging the war on drugs. In 1995 Lee P. Brown, director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy under President Clinton, led a push for expanded cooperation with the Burmese military to eradicate poppy fields and arrest traffickers. Thomas A. Constantine, director of the DEA; Assistant Secretary of State Robert Gelbard; and Under Secretary of State for Global Affairs Timothy E. Wirth supported Brown's effort. They waged their campaign even though the State Department's most recent human rights report had concluded that Burma had a highly authoritarian regime that had killed or jailed its political opponents, squelched free speech and demonstrations, and impressed thousands of people into forced labor to assist the military.[3]

Brown summarized his attitude and that of his colleagues on that uncomfortable issue. "I'm very concerned about human rights violations in Burma," Brown stated. "But I'm equally concerned about human rights in America and the poison being exported from Burma that ends up on the streets of our cities."[4] In other words, fighting drug trafficking took precedence over any qualms Americans might have about the brutally repressive nature of the Burmese junta. And, although Brown did not get his wish entirely, some U.S. cooperation with Burma continued throughout the remainder of the 1990s despite Washington's overall policy of trying to isolate the military regime.

Throughout the decades since Richard Nixon first proclaimed a war on drugs in 1971, the United States has repeatedly made a "drug war exception" in its foreign policy toward repugnant and repressive regimes. Policy toward Burma has been by no means an aberration. The United States adopted a similar approach to Panama's dictator, Manuel Noriega, Peru's authoritarian president, Alberto Fujimori, and even Cuba's dictator, Fidel Castro. Incredibly, Washington even sought to cooperate with the infamous Taliban regime in Afghanistan and praised its professed effort to eradicate the cultivation of opium poppies.

The Curious Taliban Connection

When the Taliban announced a ban on opium cultivation in early 2001, U.S. officials were most complimentary. James P. Callahan,

director of Asian affairs for the State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, uncritically relayed the alleged accounts of Afghan farmers that "the Taliban used a system of consensus-building" to develop and implement the edict.[5] That characterization was more than a little dubious, since the Taliban was not known for pursuing consensus in other aspects of its rule. *Los Angeles Times* columnist Robert Scheer was scathing in his criticism of the U.S. response. "That a totalitarian country can effectively crack down on its farmers is not surprising," Sheer noted. But he contended that "it is grotesque" for a U.S. official to describe the drug-crop crackdown in such benign terms.[6]

But the Bush administration did more than praise the Taliban's announced ban of opium cultivation. In mid-May 2001, Secretary of State Colin Powell announced a $43 million grant to Afghanistan in addition to the humanitarian aid the United States had long been providing to agencies assisting Afghan refugees.[7] Given Callahan's comment, there was little doubt that the new stipend was a reward for Kabul's anti-drug efforts. That $43 million grant needs to be placed in context. Afghanistan's estimated gross domestic product was a mere $2 billion.[8] The equivalent financial impact on the U.S. economy would have required an infusion of $215 billion. In other words, the $43 million was very serious money to Afghanistan's theocratic masters.

To make matters worse, U.S. officials were naive to take the Taliban edict at face value. The much-touted crackdown on opium poppy cultivation appears to have been little more than an illusion. Despite U.S. and UN reports that the Taliban had virtually wiped out the poppy crop in 2000–01, authorities in neighboring Tajikistan reported that the amounts coming across the border were actually increasing.[9] In reality, the Taliban gave its order to halt cultivation to drive up the price of the opium the regime had already stockpiled.[10]

Even if the Taliban had tried to stem cultivation for honest reasons, U.S. cooperation with that regime should have been morally repugnant. Among other outrages, the Taliban government prohibited the education of girls, tortured and executed political critics, and required non-Muslims to wear distinctive clothing—a practice reminiscent of Nazi Germany's requirement that Jews display the Star of David on their clothing. Yet U.S. officials deemed none of that to be a bar to cooperation with the Taliban on drug policy.

Even if the Bush administration had not been dissuaded by moral considerations, it should have been by purely pragmatic concerns. In an eerily prescient passage, Sheer noted in May 2001, "Never mind that Osama bin Laden still operates the leading anti-American terror operation from his base in Afghanistan, from which, among other crimes, he launched two bloody attacks on American embassies in Africa in 1998." Sheer was on the mark when he concluded, "The war on drugs has become our own fanatics' obsession and easily trumps all other concerns."[11]

Washington's approach came to an especially calamitous end in September 2001 when the Taliban regime was linked to bin Laden's terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon that killed more than 3,000 people. Moreover, evidence quickly emerged that the Taliban all along had been collecting millions of dollars in profits from the illicit drug trade, with much of that money going into the coffers of the terrorists.[12] Rarely is there such graphic evidence of the bankruptcy of U.S. drug policy.

Cooperating with Castro

When it comes to waging the war on drugs, no moral or ideological impediment has seemed sufficient to keep the U.S. government from cooperating with any regime. In recent years, the United States has even cooperated with Fidel Castro on drug matters. As early as 1996, Cuban and U.S. authorities collaborated in the interception and search of a Colombian freighter carrying six tons of cocaine. Cuban officials acted as

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prosecution witnesses in the trial of the crew in a U.S. court.[13]

In May 1999 Barry McCaffrey, director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, praised the Cuban government for its cooperation on the drug issue and urged a broader dialogue. McCaffrey also rejected allegations that the Cuban government itself was involved in drug trafficking, even though previous U.S. administrations had cited evidence of such activity.[14] (McCaffrey's exoneration of the Castro regime drew a stinging rebuke from Alberto Hernandez, chairman of the Cuban American National Foundation. "Cooperating with Castro on drugs is like asking Don Corleone to help you fight organized crime in New York," stated Hernandez.)[15]

What was striking about Washington's willingness to collaborate with Castro's regime on anti-drug activities was that it stood in such sharp contrast to overall U.S. policy toward Cuba. The United States had severed diplomatic relations with Castro's communist regime at the beginning of the 1960s and had maintained a far-reaching economic embargo against the island since that time. Indeed, sanctions had actually been tightened during the Clinton years. Although there were scattered voices of dissent, leaders of both the Republican and Democratic parties strongly endorsed the hard-line policy. And yet on one issue—drugs—U.S. officials were willing to deviate from the strategy of making the communist autocrat a pariah. Castro's American critics routinely excoriated him for jailing political opponents, suppressing a wide range of freedoms, and turning his country into an economic disaster. His record, in their view, precluded U.S. trade with Cuba and even made it necessary to prevent American tourists from visiting the island. But none of that apparently was an impediment to collaborating with his security forces in the war on drugs.

The policy of cooperating with the Castro regime on the drug war has drawn praise in two Council on Foreign Relations Task Force reports on policy toward Cuba.[16] In the second report, issued in 2001, the Council Task Force recommended that the United States develop "an active program of counternarcotics contacts with Cuban counterparts," and stated that such cooperation should involve "limited exchanges of personnel" with Cuba's security agencies.[17]

On another occasion, former drug czar McCaffrey reiterated that he thought that cooperation with the Castro regime was a splendid idea and urged the Bush administration to intensify mutual counterdrug activities.[18] Although there is no evidence of an intensification of cooperation under Bush, there is likewise no indication that the existing level has been scaled back.

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Washington's Affair with Manuel Noriega

When most people think of Manuel Noriega, they recall the U.S. invasion of Panama and the capture of the odious dictator. One declared purpose of the December 1989 U.S. military operation in Panama was to apprehend Noriega and bring him to Florida for trial on narcotics trafficking charges.

But that was hardly the beginning of the relationship between the United States and Noriega. In the years before the 1989 invasion, Washington's relationship with him had been of a very different nature. For years there had been close cooperation as the Panamanian strongman assisted Washington in its drive to undermine the leftist Sandinista regime in Nicaragua and prop up the right-wing government of El Salvador against Marxist rebels. Noriega had also received praise from the DEA for his cooperation in helping to stanch the flow of narcotics through his country. The latter was no small consideration, since Panama was a major transit point in the illegal drug trade.

Washington's enthusiasm for Noriega's apparent dedication to the drug war began as early as 1978 when DEA administrator Peter Bensinger thanked him for his support in the fight against drugs.[19] Eight years later one of

Bensinger's successors, John Lawn, sent Noriega an effusive thank you letter. "I would like to take this opportunity to reiterate my deep appreciation for the vigorous anti-drug trafficking policy that you have adopted, which is reflected in the numerous expulsions from Panama of accused traffickers," Lawn wrote.[20] In May 1987 Lawn again praised the Panamanian strongman for his "personal commitment" to one important drug investigation. "I look forward to our continued efforts together," Lawn wrote. "Drug traffickers around the world are now on notice that the proceeds and profits of their illegal ventures are not welcome in Panama."[21] The following year DEA spokesman Cornelius Dougherty conceded that there had been many such letters of praise over the years. "The bottom line is that he was helpful and cooperative," Dougherty maintained.[22]

Yet throughout the 1980s Noriega systematically undermined democratic rule—typically by rigging elections to ensure the victory of compliant civilian front men while he held the real reins of power as the head of Panama's armed forces. Noriega was also not above harassing, jailing, and torturing political opponents.[23] Indeed, he was apparently not above murdering political opponents. Noriega's domestic political troubles first became acute in late 1987 when Roberto Diaz, a retired high-ranking Panamanian military officer and former Noriega confidant, made a series of explosive accusations. Most notably, Diaz presented evidence that the general had set up the 1984 murder of a leading opposition politician who had spoken out against Noriega's alleged involvement in drug trafficking.

Until the high-profile Diaz allegations, Washington seemed impervious to evidence that Noriega was perverting Panama's political system and brutalizing political opponents. In that respect, the actions of U.S. officials were consistent with an increasingly familiar pattern: as long as the ruler in question seemed cooperative on the drug war, U.S. leaders were willing to look the other way regarding other conduct, however repugnant. What is perhaps more surprising is that U.S. officials also seemed impervious to evidence that Noriega himself was involved in the drug trade.

Ironically, throughout the period when Noriega was winning praise for his anti-drug measures, there were mounting indications of his corruption. He had been cited by at least one source as the person at the center of Panama's drug trafficking network a decade before his indictment and the subsequent U.S. invasion. As *Wall Street Journal* correspondent Frederick Kempe noted, "Noriega had been arresting many drug traffickers and extraditing some of them to the United States, but just as often he extorted traffickers before they could gain their release." In essence, while appearing to help the Americans fight the drug trade, "he was only turning in his competition, as he skimmed off the profits from a multibillion-dollar industry."[24]

Noriega was engaged in a delicate balancing act: protecting the interests of the Colombian cartels while retaining the support of U.S. officials. "It was a tricky game," Kempe notes, "but American agents in Panama were particularly easy to con." And it worked for many years. "With each major drug bust that Noriega assisted, and with each fugitive that he helped to extradite, Noriega grew in the DEA's esteem, at the same time that he was expanding business with the cartel. It was a remarkable balancing act that can only be explained one way: Noriega was using the DEA as his own private enforcer."[25] The invasion of Panama and the arrest of Noriega were a dramatic admission of just how misguided previous U.S. policy had been.

Flirting with Fujimori

Anyone who might have assumed that the Noriega experience had taught U.S. officials a sobering lesson about cooperating with corrupt dictators in the name of waging the war on drugs soon received evidence to the contrary. The most graphic example was the increasingly

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cozy relationship between Washington and the government of Peru's autocratic president, Alberto Fujimori, in the 1990s.

The trend toward democracy in Latin America experienced a major blow in April 1992 when Fujimori declared to the nation that he had assumed exclusive control of the government in a "self-coup" (*autogolpe*) with the support of the military. His revamped regime moved quickly to shut down all independent branches of the government: he dissolved the Peruvian congress and eviscerated the judicial system by summarily dismissing 13 supreme court justices as well as all the judges on the Tribunal of Constitutional Guarantees. During the early years of his authoritarian rule, the U.S. State Department and Justice Department frequently condemned the regime's human rights abuses. As the Fujimori government pressed its campaign against the Maoist Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) guerrillas, there was an abundance of such abuses.[26]

The Fujimori government's prosecution of the drug war was more apparent than real.

Fujimori's offensive against the Shining Path also affected many of the peasants in the Upper Huallaga Valley and other remote locales who grew much of the coca crop and at least countenanced if not actively supported the guerrillas. As the effort to stamp out the Shining Path gained momentum in the mid and late 1990s, Washington began to look on the autocratic regime in Lima with greater tolerance. Indeed, from the standpoint of U.S. officials, Fujimori's decision to unleash the military offered the promise of a dual benefit. Not only did it promise to weaken a dangerous radical-left political force, but it also seemed to be disrupting the source of the bulk of the cocaine flowing from the Andean region. Between 1995 and 1998, the acreage under coca cultivation in Peru dropped by 40 percent. By 1999 the decline reached 56 percent. U.S. officials used terms such as "amazing" and "astonishing" and were quick to credit the Peruvian government.[27] In truth, the principal reason for the decline was a fungus that swept through the Peruvian coca crop during those years.

During the 1990s the U.S. military assisted the Peruvian government in interdicting planes carrying drugs out of Peru to processing facilities in Colombia.[28] U.S. radar monitoring of suspect flights was crucial to that operation. By 1998 Washington was significantly expanding its drug war financial aid to the Peruvian government in other ways. Under one program, a five-year, $60 million effort, the United States sought to greatly expand Peru's force of river patrol boats to combat the drug trade in the Amazon basin. At that time, the Peruvian military had just 16 such boats. The U.S. aid would provide an additional 54 boats as well as funds to train the additional military personnel needed to man them.[29]

The Fujimori government's prosecution of the drug war was more apparent than real, however. Indeed, as far as the Peruvian military was concerned, the principal offense of the peasants involved in growing coca was not that they were involved in the drug trade but that they helped fund the Shining Path. A cynic might even argue that the military's real complaint was that too many peasants paid off the Shining Path instead of the military. Throughout the 1990s, allegations surfaced repeatedly that Vladimiro Montesinos, the head of the National Intelligence Service, used his office to shield friendly drug traffickers even as the military used force against drug-crop peasants who were deemed enemies of the regime. After Fujimori fell from power and fled the country in late 2000, those allegations soared in number.[30] Evidence emerged that Montesinos may have received as much as $1 million from a leading Mexican drug cartel.[31] At the same time, he and his intelligence apparatus were apparently receiving up to $1 million a year from the CIA.[32]

Despite the unsavory nature of the Fujimori-Montesinos regime, U.S. praise for Peru's anti-drug efforts increased steadily throughout the 1990s. Between 1995 and 1998 coca production in Peru supposedly declined by 40 percent and the price of coca leaves fell by half. That drew praise from U.S. Ambassador Dennis Jett. Peru had "demonstrated that the battle can be won against an enemy that doesn't respect frontiers or laws,"

Jett stated.[33] It didn't seem to bother Washington unduly that it was cooperating with a regime that had used the military to undermine democracy in Peru.

Learning from the Past

The willingness of U.S. administrations to collaborate with the most odious dictatorships in the war on drugs is long-standing and continuing. It is more than a little distressing to see the U.S. government betray America's values in that fashion. Moreover, it has been a myopic, utterly futile policy. In case after case, Washington's ostensible partners in the anti-drug crusade have themselves been extensively involved in drug trafficking. The fiascos with Manuel Noriega and Afghanistan's Taliban government were only the most notorious examples.

One might well speculate about why a succession of administrations, Republican and Democrat, conservative and liberal, would engage in such conduct. The core reason is probably continued frustration at the lack of lasting, meaningful results in the international phase of the war on drugs. In the last three decades the United States has made a concerted effort to cut off, or at least significantly reduce, the flow of drugs into the country from Latin America, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. Despite that effort, more illegal drugs enter the United States from those sources today than did when the "supply-side" campaign began. Instead of facing the reality that a prohibitionist strategy is doomed to fail, that it merely creates a lucrative black-market premium that attracts new producers, U.S. officials are willing to make common cause with any regime that promises to combat the scourge of narcotics, even when the regime in question is thoroughly repressive.

The folly of collaborating with unsavory partners in the international war on drugs may be of more than historical interest. Bush administration officials and congressional drug warriors alike are fairly gushing with enthusiasm over the election of Alvaro Uribe as Colombia's new president. Uribe campaigned on a platform advocating both vigorous resistance to Colombia's leftist insurgents and an intensified effort to eradicate the country's lucrative drug trade. Perhaps Uribe is a sincere and honorable man who is merely mistaken in his belief that pursuing a prohibitionist strategy toward drugs can ever be effective.

But there are troubling signs that he may be from the same mold as some of Washington's other unsavory partners in the drug war. One disturbing indicator was that members of the principal right-wing paramilitary organization, the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), openly backed Uribe's candidacy.[34] The AUC is on the State Department's list of terrorist organizations, and Colombia's outgoing president, Andres Pastrana, has accused it of being responsible for at least 70 percent of the atrocities committed in his country's complex civil war.[35] In addition to the unsettling reality of the AUC's enthusiasm for Uribe, one of the new president's closest associates—and probably a high-level appointee in his administration—has been accused of involvement in the drug trade.[36] Perhaps these factors will prove to be nothing more than ephemeral dark clouds. But it is also possible that Washington is acquiring another unsavory associate in the war on drugs.

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