

## ***38. International Drug War***

The Clinton administration is spending a record \$13.2 billion on anti-drug programs during fiscal year 1995. Of that amount, \$1.6 billion will be used in attempts to stop the flow of illegal drags into the United States. Although Washington has spent more than \$18 billion since 1982 to fight the international war on drugs, cocaine, heroin, and other illicit substances continue to cross U.S. borders without difficulty at levels unchanged by federal counternarcotics policy.

There is little reason to believe that the supply-side campaign against drags, which has failed by any measure, will show even the most minimal signs of success. Moreover, the drug war has proved economically and socially disruptive in many source countries and endangers the stability of fragile democracies in which illegal narcotics are produced. It is time to recognize U.S. drug abuse as a domestic problem and take the following actions:

- **End the international phase of the drug war. Shifting emphasis among the various components of the overseas campaign will not work.**
- **End the practice of official certification of drug-source countries, and repeal all legislation requiring the U.S. government to invoke sanctions against foreign nations for noncompliance with destructive counternarcotics policies.**
- **Allow exports, especially agricultural goods, from drug-source nations to enter the United States duty-free. That will encourage producers to cultivate legal exports as an alternative to growing illicit crops.**

### ***The Mix of Flawed Strategies***

Washington's international anti-narcotics campaign is made up of three components: interdiction of drug-trafficking routes, eradication of illegal

crops, and substitution of legal crops for drug crops. The campaign has focused primarily on eliminating coca and cocaine, which are produced in the Andean countries, and opium and heroin, the majority of which are produced in Southeast Asia.

Each aspect of the supply-side strategy has had unimpressive results. U.S. authorities, for example, seize only 5 to 15 percent of drug imports. Interdiction efforts are frustrated by the ability of traffickers to quickly adopt new routes and smuggling methods in response to the latest monitoring initiatives. A study by the RAND Corporation provides an important reason why spending more money on Coast Guard patrols or radar devices is unlikely to discourage drug trafficking or U.S. drug use. Since smuggling costs make up only about 10 percent of the final value of cocaine, even doubling the rate of drug seizures would have a negligible effect on the price of cocaine in the United States. Losses due to interdiction simply do not significantly raise the traffickers' cost of doing business. Recognizing such difficulties, the Clinton administration has decided to deemphasize that component of the narcotics control strategy.

The U.S. government has pressured the governments of drug-source countries to eradicate drug crops by burning peasants' fields, spraying pesticides, and slashing drug plants. Those measures have had little effect. For example, while the State Department's annual International Narcotics Control Strategy Report indicated that the area planted in coca fell from 211,000 hectares in 1992 to 195,000 hectares in 1993, that drop was due mostly to a natural fungus that had attacked coca leaves in Peru; virtually no eradication had taken place in Peru for several years. Elsewhere in the Andean region, the amount of land dedicated to coca cultivation has increased or stayed the same despite eradication efforts.

More important are the drug crop production figures. From 1988 to 1992 coca leaf production increased from 293,000 metric tons to 333,000. In 1993 production declined to 271,000 metric tons, but again, the drop was due to the outbreak of fungus in Peru, not to official drug control efforts. In Colombia, Ecuador, and Bolivia, by contrast, coca production increased. Likewise, the worldwide production of opium continues to grow, rising from 2,590 metric tons in 1988 to 3,700 in 1993. In short, eradication and interdiction efforts have proven to be a mere inconvenience to the \$300 billion worldwide illicit narcotics business.

The meager results of those programs, and the higher profits that cultivation of cocoa offers in comparison with that of legal crops, have prompted the Clinton administration to emphasize crop-substitution programs. Lead-

ers of some source nations also prefer to stress alternative development projects as a more "humanitarian" way of fighting the drug war. In November 1994, for instance, Bolivian president **Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada** called for at least \$2 billion in foreign aid to provide coca growers with legal forms of employment.

The United States subsidizes the cultivation of such plants as corn, bananas, and cocoa as a way of providing peasant farmers an economic incentive to harvest legal crops. U.S. aid is also used to build roads and other infrastructure to help develop the legal agricultural market.

Encouraging farmers to switch crops in that way has been ineffective despite more than 20 years of U.S. efforts in numerous countries. There are many reasons for that. Drug plants can often be grown in areas and under conditions that legal crops cannot. Switching crops is not economically viable. Peasants can earn up to 10 times more from harvesting coca, for instance, than from growing legal plants. In addition, coca growers often accept crop-substitution funds and simply cultivate coca elsewhere. In those cases, U.S. aid has the perverse effect of subsidizing drug production. U.S.-funded improvements in infrastructure also unwittingly help drug traffickers, who use new and repaired roads to develop their trade.

The fundamental flaw with crop-substitution efforts, however, is that they assume a relatively static price for drug plants. Given that the cost of producing illicit crops represents a small percentage of the final drug price (e.g., the cost of coca leaf production amounts to less than 1 percent of the final price of cocaine), traffickers will always be able to afford to pay growers prices that are higher than those commanded by subsidized legal alternatives. In effect, the illegal drug trade can almost certainly pay more than the legal crop prices envisioned by substitution programs.

### ***Gaining "Cooperation" in the Drug War***

Repeated failure has not discouraged U.S. drug warriors. Leaders of source nations, on the other hand, have correctly noted that as long as drugs remain illegal in the United States, thus creating an enormous profit potential, and U.S. demand for those drugs continues, the task of eliminating drug production and trafficking is virtually impossible. Moreover, many of those leaders have been reluctant to turn their countries into bloody battlefields in what they consider primarily a U.S. war. U.S. counternarcotics law, however, does not give those governments much choice.

Through a series of trade and aid sanctions and rewards, Washington is able to "convince" foreign governments to adopt U.S. drug control measures. The Anti-Drug Abuse Acts of 1986 and 1988, amended by the International Narcotics Control Act of 1992, make access to the U.S. market and foreign aid handouts contingent on the participation of source nations in drug control programs.

Under those laws, the president of the United States must determine whether a drug-source country has cooperated in the supply-side campaign. Countries not certified by the president, or ones whose certification Congress disapproves, face mandatory sanctions, including suspension of at least 50 percent of U.S. aid and some trade benefits. Discretionary sanctions that the president may also impose include the end of some preferential trade treatment, tariff increases of up to 50 percent, and limits on air traffic between the United States and the noncertified country.

The effect of such legislation is, of course, to gain "cooperation" in the drug war. Latin American countries in particular cannot afford to lose access to the large U.S. market. That enormous pressure places government leaders in source countries in the awkward position of trying to satisfy often conflicting domestic and U.S. demands. Thus, disputes between the United States and foreign governments over extradition or enforcement policies have been common and have soured U.S. relations with Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, and to some extent Mexico.

### ***The Impact on Other Societies***

The international drug war has not reduced the availability of drugs in the United States, but it has caused severe problems in many source nations. In Latin America, eradication campaigns have created hostility toward fragile democratic governments, and more direct attempts to attack drug trafficking have spread corruption, increased violence, and strengthened the region's militaries.

It is understandable that Latin American leaders have been reluctant partners in Washington's anti-drug programs. Nevertheless, U.S. officials do not acknowledge that problems associated with the narcotics trade may actually result from the U.S.-led crusade against drugs. In a patronizing statement before the House Foreign Affairs Committee in June 1994, for example, Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics Control Matters Robert S. Gelbard claimed, "Thanks to our leadership, governments are increasingly aware of the political, economic, and social threat drug trafficking poses to their societies."

In fact, there is ample reason to believe that the narcotics trade, per se, is not as great a threat to other societies as is prohibitionist drug policy. Drug trafficking in Colombia, for example, was a lucrative business for years, but it did not contribute to high levels of corruption or violence until the government began waging campaigns against marijuana in the 1970s and then against cocaine in the 1980s. On the other hand, much U.S. narcotics control aid has financed militaries that have dismal human rights records and have often been involved in the drug trade themselves. Washington merely reduced military aid after Peruvian president Alberto Fujimori abolished the constitution and congress in a military-backed self-coup in 1992.

Fujimori's abrogation of constitutional rule was largely intended to fight pervasive police and judicial corruption and radical left-wing guerrilla groups such as the Shining Path. The U.S.-orchestrated drug war nourished those problems. Eradication programs caused widespread resentment among peasant populations whose livelihood depends on coca cultivation. That resentment swelled the ranks of the Shining Path, which provided the *cocaleros* with protection against the Peruvian state. Supply reduction efforts also prompted a marriage of convenience between the guerrillas, who were in need of money, and narcotics traffickers, who found the protection of their drug crops essential. Thus, the Shining Path was able to gain control of vast regions of Peru and earn up to \$100 million per year from the narcotics trade. The story is much the same in Colombia where a number of guerrilla organizations draw the majority of their earnings from the drug trade. Unfortunately, the drug wars in Colombia and Peru have aided insurgent movements responsible for causing tens of billions of dollars' worth of destruction and thousands of civilian deaths.

Only after years of refusing to eradicate coca crops and after decapitating the Shining Path has the Peruvian government been able to pacify the country. But drug trafficking continues, and the Peruvian armed forces are as involved in the narcotics trade as ever. That is not surprising since poorly paid military personnel will always be easily corrupted by the disproportionately rich narcotics business—at least as long as prohibition in consumer nations continues to create a huge black market premium.

Nevertheless, the Clinton administration, displeased with the Peruvian government's commitment to the drug war, did not grant it "full" certification in 1994. Although the administration resisted actually decertifying Peru, it urged that country's government to begin eradicating coca crops. Such demands have soured U.S. relations with Peru and other drug-source countries that view certain narcotics control measures as counterproductive.

But Washington does not tolerate criticisms of its international crusade, much less allow discussion of alternatives such as legalization. When Gustavo de Greiff, Colombia's recently resigned prosecutor general, suggested in early 1994 that legalization should at least be considered, U.S. officials assassinated his character. Never mind that U.S. officials had long professed much respect for De Greiff; his public announcement provoked accusations, unsupported by evidence, of dishonesty and lack of integrity as a law enforcer.

U.S. officials, meanwhile, show little interest in analyzing the probable effects of drug legalization or drug control policies that differ from Washington's. Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.), chairman of the Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Terrorism and Narcotics, proclaimed that De Greiff's "recent actions and statements . . . threaten to bring about his nation's capitulation to the Cali cocaine cartel" and that his "positions are nearly identical with those of the [Cali] cartel itself." De Greiff's assessment of the situation was probably more accurate: "Legalization is the worst thing that could happen to traffickers."

Indeed, every time the futility of prohibitionist policies is pointed out, drug warriors identify trivial successes such as increases in heroin seizures or suppressed trafficking in some region as evidence of "important gains." But those successes are invariably temporary and do nothing to stop the multi-billion-dollar drug industry from adapting quickly to changed conditions.

Washington's policies have in fact done much to spread the narcotics trade into areas and countries that might otherwise have remained unaffected by the business. Supply-reduction efforts have encouraged traffickers to disperse their operations to Brazil, Venezuela, Argentina, Chile, and other countries. As long as Washington coerces nations to impose harsh drug control policies, the effects, as we have seen, will only be negative. That is especially worrisome given the range of developing economies in drug-source countries—from Mexico to Ukraine to Thailand—that are struggling to transform themselves into thriving free-market systems.

## **Conclusion**

Despite billions of dollars spent and decades of experience, Washington's international drug war has failed to reduce the supply of narcotics to the United States. Instead, supply-side drug control programs have caused tremendous economic, political, and social problems in foreign nations. It is time to recognize the destructiveness of those policies and

replace coercive tactics with ones that encourage civil society and economic growth in narcotics-producing countries. That means opening U.S. markets to those countries' legal goods instead of threatening them with sanctions. Ending the international drug war would improve U.S. relations with numerous countries and prove, once and for all, how little overseas drug control efforts affect consumption in the United States.

### ***Suggested Readings***

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