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U.S. Drug Control Strategy and Latin America

submitted by

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Introduction

On September 5, 1989 President Bush in a nationally televised address presented his first National Drug Control Strategy to the Congress and American people. From the administration's point of view this was the first time the Federal government had clearly developed and articulated a cohesive plan for combatting the epidemic use of illegal drugs in the U.S. The "drug war" had officially become a national priority with international implications.

Is the production and distribution of illegal drugs, particularly cocaine, a threat to national security? The American people believe it is. When asked by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations to identify the biggest problems facing the country today, drug abuse was identified as the number-one threat (Reilly 11). Similarly, U.S. national security strategy makes the reduction of illegal drugs into this country critical to survival as "a free and independent nation, with its fundamental values intact and its institutions and people secure" (Franko-Jones 6).

Acknowledging the production and distribution of illegal substances as a national security issue the Bush administration identified the Andean cocaine-producing countries of Bolivia, Columbia, and Peru as the first "front" in its war on drugs. In concert with the leaders of these countries President Bush stepped up efforts to curb cocaine supply at its source. This essay will focus on President Bush's Andean initiative, U.S. objectives and policy with respect to Latin America's role in the supply and distribution of cocaine, and will conclude with some remarks for a course of action for U.S. policy.

Problem

Illegal drug use in the U.S. has reached epidemic proportions. Congressional researchers estimate more than 26 million Americans buy and use illegal drugs spending over \$40 billion annually. The addictive nature of these drugs, their high cost, and their illegality play a role in over half of the street crime in the United States. Four-fifths of all illicit drugs consumed in the U.S. are of foreign origin. Nearly 100 percent of the cocaine used comes from sources outside the U.S. (Perl 2).

In 1990, most of the cocaine traffic into the U.S. was controlled by two Columbian organizations, the Medellin and Cali Cartels. Peruvian and Bolivian trafficking organizations also expanded their operations independent of the Columbian influence (Justice, DEA 1). Additionally, Latin America is the primary producer of cocaine consumed in the U.S. Therefore, most U.S. counternarcotic efforts are directed towards this region.

The president's national drug strategy has two elements, reduction of demand and reduction of supply. To reduce demand, it is necessary to educate the American people about the consequences of drug dependency, treat and cure addicts, and increase the price and risk of apprehension at the consumer level. To reduce supply, it is necessary to impede or eliminate drug cartel operations and seize or destroy their products and assets (Perl 2). By using the criminal justice system to identify, arrest, prosecute, and incarcerate those who break American laws, it is possible to affect both supply and demand (National Strategy 23).

Federal spending on drug control programs for Fiscal Year (FY) 1992 is \$11.7 billion, a 700 percent increase since 1981. Since President Bush

has been in office he has increased spending by 82 percent. Approximately 70 percent of the FY 1992 drug budget is earmarked for supply reduction (National Strategy, Budget, 1-2). Interestingly, 66 percent of the American people polled in late 1990 would increase federal spending for programs to combat illegal drugs, second only to aid for education (Reilly 11).

Current U.S. Narcotics Control Policy

The primary goal of U.S. narcotics policy is to reduce the supply of illegal drugs entering this country. A secondary goal is to reduce the amount of illicit narcotics cultivated, processed, and consumed worldwide. To implement this policy four elements must interact simultaneously. First, narcotic crops such as coca and opium should be targeted for eradication. Second, every effort should be made to interdict illegal drug shipments before they reach American borders. Third, international cooperation is essential to encourage drug producing nations to reduce cultivation, production, and trafficking. Finally, sanctions such as reduced economic assistance should be imposed on drug producing nations who fail to "cooperate fully" with U.S. efforts to reduce the supply of illegal drugs (Perl 3-4).

The Andean Initiative is a strategy designed to "work with Andean governments to disrupt and destroy the growing, processing, and transportation of coca and coca products within the source countries, in order to reduce the supply of cocaine entering our country (Franko-Jones 6)." In developing this initiative, three key objectives were identified. The presidents of the U.S., Bolivia, Peru, and Columbia agreed to:

- Strengthen the political will and institutional capability of host governments to confront the cocaine trade.

- Increase the effectiveness of military and law enforcement activities against the cocaine industry.

- Inflict significant damage on trafficking organizations.

This comprehensive, coordinated, and intensive anti-narcotics program aimed at the supply side of the equation was a dramatic departure from the disjointed anti-drug efforts of the past. The most significant departure was the increased role given to the military. Military assistance pacts were signed with each of the Andean nations. Military forces in each of the nations were given leading roles in the war on drugs. Once the military enforcement initiatives were in place and working, the U.S. would provide significant economic assistance to the region totaling over \$2.2 billion.

Has this new initiative been successful? Does the current narcotics control policy best serve the vital interests of the U.S.? Is there a better way to attack the problem? A review of the drug-war campaign since signing the Andean Initiative in 1989 may answer these questions and possibly raise more.

Analysis of Current Policy

Although the current narcotics control policy is better than the hodgepodge programs of the late seventies and early eighties, several major problems exist. Perhaps the greatest problem, in my view, is focusing on supply rather than the root problem of cocaine use. However, current policy primarily attacks the cocaine problem at its supply source.

A cursory examination of one aspect of this strategy highlights the difficulty with this approach.

To successfully prosecute the drug war outside American borders requires the cooperation of many actors in the target nations. Governments, police, militaries, and peasant producers must possess the will and the capability to curb production and stop trafficking (Andreas 107-111). Over the last several years it has become painfully obvious that this will and capability does not sufficiently exist in the Andean region. The U.S. government seems to believe that increasing economic assistance, training, and equipment can create the will and capability. This logic is not sound. Peru is a good example.

In October 1991, the Government Accounting Office (GAO) reported to Congress that U.S. counternarcotics programs in Peru were not effective. Peru produces about 60 percent of the world's coca crop, primarily in the Upper Huallaga Valley. As part of the Andean Strategy the U.S. would provide Peru with \$35.9 million in military aid and \$19 million in law enforcement assistance in FY 1990. This aid was earmarked for equipment, vehicles, training, and technical assistance. Economic aid was also included to improve the Peruvian economy. Peru turned down the military aid.

To date, Peru's government has been unable to create a climate that is conducive to effective anti-drug operations. The government is unable to exert sufficient control over the military and the police. Coordination between the two elements on counternarcotic issues is inadequate. Government agencies are unable to control the airports used by drug traffickers. Insurgent groups, like the Shining Path, threaten the security of the government and more importantly have established a popular

stronghold in the Upper Huallaga Valley. In the countryside, insurgents protect the coca producing peasants from both the military and the police. In return they retain part of the profits from the coca producers to finance their movement.

In a January 25, 1991, Washington Post article, Eugene Robinson reported a U.S. helicopter shot down just before dawn on January 12, 1991. The aircraft was flying on an anti-drug mission in the Upper Huallaga Valley. Three Americans were killed. An on-going investigation is trying to determine if the helicopter was shot down by Shining Path guerrillas. Until the results of the investigation become known, U.S. anti-drug operations in Peru will be "severely curtailed" according to an U.S. Embassy spokesman.

Other problems exist in Peru. The U.S. is having difficulty managing its assistance programs. The executive branch has not established the requisite management oversight necessary to execute in-country counternarcotic aid programs (GAO 1). For example, no reliable criteria have been established to measure Peru's progress in meeting U.S. counternarcotic objectives. Further, the U.S. Embassy lacks an end-use monitoring system for military aid provided to Peru, despite a State Department directive in August 1990 to do so. Finally, the U.S. is providing a substantial amount of law enforcement training to police units that do not have a counternarcotics mission.

Its obvious from the above example that the Peruvian government lacks the will and the capability to effectively combat the supply of cocaine leaving its borders. More importantly, this example demonstrates how U.S. drug strategists fail to recognize the "systemic character" of the supply reduction problem in the Andean region. Reducing the supply of cocaine at

its source threatens the economic viability of the region and the political survival of its leaders (Andreas 115).

Additionally, this example clearly indicates a lack of management oversight by the U.S. government. This lack of oversight demonstrates how vital linkages between U.S. enforcement, diplomatic, and development agencies has gone awry in the execution of the tactics necessary to implement the administration's strategy. These vital linkages are also necessary when dealing with the governments of the Andean region.

Although the above analysis is limited in scope, it does provide some food for thought about current counternarcotics policy in the Andean region. Maybe the focus should be on demand rather than supply.

Policy Recommendations

As indicated earlier, many problems exist in executing the current policy of supply reduction in the Andean region. The above discussion highlighted a few. However, other major problems surface when examining the following areas: corruption in the government, military, and police; economic dislocation of peasants engaged in producing the coca crop; reliance on counterinsurgency strategies; and failure of eradication programs. While the Andean Initiative should not be abandoned, it is essential to make changes at the margins in the areas of oversight management, training, diplomacy, program management by the executive branch, assistance allocation, and strategy implementation.

The federal government is presently standing on a precipice of opportunity. With the fall of communism and the collapse of the Soviet Union, we have ample reason and resources to reevaluate our vital security

interests relative to the scourge of drug addiction in the U.S. A more balanced approach with a pronounced shift of drug policy focus to the demand side of the equation is necessary if we are going to win the war on drugs.

Peter Andreas, Eva Bertram, Morris Blackman, and Kenneth Sharpe in "Dead-End Drug Wars" say it best. "There is no Andean supply-reduction strategy that can significantly lower the demands for drugs at home. The supply-reduction policy defies both the logic of the market and the rational interests of local governments and populations." With this in mind, a concerted effort to reduce domestic consumption must be paramount in the formulation of U.S. drug policy.

While we cannot afford to abandon efforts in Latin America we must find better ways to implement our strategy. It is equally important to increase funding for the war on drugs. Coupled with better management it may be possible to make changes at the margins of foreign policy with respect to counternarcotic operations in Latin America.

Finally, we must open the debate in Washington, between all Federal agencies, health professionals, and policy makers to find ways to work the domestic drug agenda into the national and international conscience. Through education, research, treatment, and compassion it may be possible to eventually win this important war.

These policy recommendations come with many reservations, not the least of which is the perception of our Latin neighbors. Will the shift in drug-war focus be viewed as a retrenchment in Latin American policy by the U.S.? Will economic assistance be cut back or eliminated? Will the U.S. fail to honor commitments previously agreed to in the Andean Initiative? Will a change in Latin America drug policy lead to changes in

other political, economic, and military policies? The answers to these questions cannot get lost in the inertia to address the demand side of the equation. It will become even more important to strengthen the linkages between foreign and domestic policy issues.

Perhaps now is the time to reduce the differentiation between foreign and domestic policy, both in the minds of the politicians and the minds of the American people. Hopefully, the American government will not fall off that precipice of opportunity.

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