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THE COUNTER-NARCOTICS DILEMMA

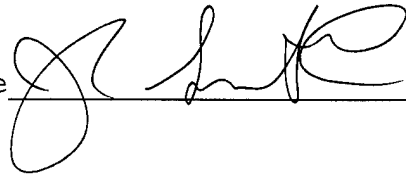
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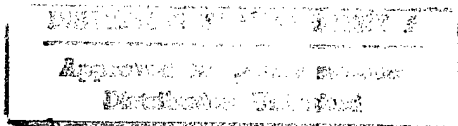
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The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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### Abstract of

The long-term nature of counter-drug efforts requires a serious and persistent effort, based upon dedicated funding and unity of effort. Anything less will result in wasted resources and strategic failure. Interdiction, while both costly and marginally effective in its own right, is absolutely necessary if efforts attempting to reduce production and demand are to be successful. A realignment of the current counter-narcotics organization and its command structure is crucial if interdiction is to remain a viable part of the strategy. The fusion of intelligence, assets and further streamlining will improve the chances of meeting mission objectives. The alignment of AORs to more closely fit the geographic responsibilities of the two cognizant CINCs will be better served through existing command structures, and maintain a regional, vice operational, focus. In this way, consistent and effective emphasis can be maintained on combating a problem that otherwise continues to pose a significant and lethal threat to our own citizens, and works to erode stability within our hemisphere.

## Introduction.

In the post-Cold War era, lacking serious military challenges to the security of the United States, few threats have received more fanfare and attention than the rhetorical "War on Drugs". A current fixture in the National Security Policy, it poses a unique and extremely difficult proposition for those tasked with its execution. The perplexities of the counter-narcotics effort influence all three levels of war--strategic, tactical and operational. The desired end-state of stopping, or at least stemming the flow of illegal drugs into the United States is not easily accomplished using standard military means. The limiting restraints imposed by both domestic and international law, respect for national sovereignty and the inability to establish effective measures of success, make the application of operational art untenable in the classic sense. In support of the nation's anti-drug campaign, thirty-seven agencies have been tasked with executing a mission aimed at reducing the production of narcotics, eliminating the domestic appetite of users in the United States and interdicting the transportation system. It is this last mission, of transit route interdiction, its associated command and control structure and asset utilization, which will be examined here. The importance of the mission demands that the current system be restructured in order to achieve more effective results.

### The Threat.

Understanding the complexities of the drug threat is by no means an easy task. In terms of operational art, any estimate of capabilities, intentions, tactics and even centers of gravity defy typical modeling. The depth of the drug problem confronting the United States lends itself to all levels of warfare. Aside from the obvious strategic challenge of combating domestic drug abuse and attitudes, the inability to target narco-traffickers is due in large part to the awesome economic and political power which they wield in the producing nations.<sup>1</sup> In many cases, the income produced by drug cartels is competitive with the economic power of the nations where they operate. This strategic element makes an international policy aimed at curbing production a difficult proposition for concerned country teams and operational commanders alike.

Similarly, operational efforts in interdiction and counter-production are greatly influenced by the level of intrusion and cooperation permitted, or denied, by host-nations and allies. Further complicating the situation, is the fact that drug forces remain spread out and are able to operate independently, making the opportunity to force decisive engagements virtually impossible.<sup>2</sup> Instead, the operational focus has been reduced to a series of tactical and diplomatic initiatives that work in support of the overall counter-drug effort. Finally, operations to interdict traffic, or to eradicate producers are often

easily countered by the flexibility and ease of maneuver which is characteristic of narcotics traffickers. Pressure on maritime traffic merely increases the flow of drugs over land and air routes. Short of a total air, land and sea blockade (something not feasible over the long run), it is reasonable to assume that interdiction by itself will fall short of the objective.<sup>3</sup>

Does the fact that interdiction is so difficult mean that such a strategy should be abandoned? Evidence suggests that it should be continued. Even as a partial or short term effort, interdiction poses a significant threat to individual smugglers which at least increases the risk and costs involved in trafficking.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Mission History.**

Before commencing an analysis of the operational aspects of the anti-narcotics strategy, an understanding of the policy and its inherent limitations is required. While the threat of illegal drugs is by no means a new one, its elevation in national importance is quite recent. In 1986, Presidential Directive 221 declared illegal drugs to be a direct threat to national security and U.S. interests.<sup>5</sup> This shift in priority also led to the creation of several agencies and an increase in resources designed to counter the drug threat.

The current doctrine recognizes that there are three supporting elements to the drug trade: the source countries (which, for the purposes of this paper include Bolivia, Peru

and Colombia), the end-user (the American public) and the transportation system which connects the two.<sup>6</sup>

Much of the current counter-drug strategy is aimed at reducing demand for illegal narcotics in the United States. That mission is currently under the supervision of the Office of National Drug Control Policy, headed by Gen. Barry McCaffrey. In that the military and the operational task force commander can have no realistic part in deterring or preventing U.S. *demand* for illegal narcotics, it will not be explored here. Eliminating illegal narcotics at the source is also beyond the scope and authority of the military, due both to the difficulty that would entail, and the restraints of international law. That task falls more appropriately to the host-nations and State Department (or country teams), with the military acting in a supporting role. Given the economic weakness of South America, the fragility of their governments and lack of alternatives to offer poor agrarian peasants, there appears to be no short-term answer to curtailing the production of illegal drugs.

The restraints imposed by international law and *posse comitatus* have further limited the activities of cognizant geographic commanders (CINCs) to host-nation assistance and transit route interdiction and monitoring.<sup>7</sup> Both implicitly and by interpretation, these restraints and their impact on flexibility and cooperation with allied and host-nations,

makes the use of military forces both diplomatically and operationally complicated.

In order to evaluate how best to cope with the trafficking of illegal narcotics, one should examine the critical factors which exist in the drug trade and determine an appropriate center of gravity. The two most effective centers of gravity probably exist in the producers and users.<sup>8</sup> As pointed out earlier, however, they are the most difficult to eliminate and are also beyond the abilities and authority of the military or a joint task force. While Cartel leadership offers a tempting target, the numbers of competitors and opportunists are too great to expect anything other than short-term inconvenience to the overall drug trade. The critical vulnerability then, appears to exist in the transportation routes and methods utilized by drug smugglers. The following sections will deal with the operational designs and weakness of the interdiction effort, and their impact on mission accomplishment.

#### **Counter-narcotics Organization and Development.**

In 1988, Congress established the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), to develop, organize and coordinate anti-narcotics strategies, and to establish domestic and international interdiction operations.<sup>9</sup> In turn, ONDCP directed the U.S. Customs Service to establish a series of Command, Control, Communications and Intelligence (C3I) Centers around the country to coordinate and fuse command and control functions required in interdiction.

More agencies were required, however, as these initial organizations lacked sufficient assets, resources and authority to effectively counter the infusion of drugs. The end of the Cold-War afforded the military the opportunity to utilize its vast resources in an attempt to aid in that effort.

Incorporation of the Department of Defense in 1989, established the military as the lead agency in charge of detection and monitoring of aerial and maritime trafficking.<sup>10</sup> This increase in capabilities, and the resultant increase in force size, resulted in the creation of three Joint Inter-agency Task Forces (JIATFs) in 1994, designed to combine and coordinate surveillance and law-enforcement efforts.<sup>11</sup> Employing Coast Guard, U.S. Customs and DOD resources, the "force multiplier" effect has been outstanding, at least on the tactical level. These combined teams were intended to complement each other and overcome the lack of law-enforcement authority on the part of the military, and a severe lack of assets by National Law Enforcement Agencies (NLEAs).

Presently, these task forces, along with the Domestic Air Interdiction Coordination Center (DAICC), are separated by both geographic areas of responsibility (AORs) and functional abilities. JIATF East in Key West, controls and coordinates interdiction efforts throughout the Caribbean. JIATF West maintains responsibility for the Pacific theater and JIATF South monitors counter-narcotics operations in

Central and South Americas. Given the extent of the inter-agency effort and the geographic size of the AORs, it is understandable that certain difficulties developed. A recurring demand for greater surveillance and intelligence assets, inter-agency rivalries and an apparent lack of coordination and synchronization have all worked to hamper overall operational and strategic success.

The present command structure relies on a system of Directors and Deputy Directors assigned from the Coast Guard, DOD and the U.S. Customs Service. Individual JIATFs utilize personnel and assets from parent organizations on the basis of tactical control (TACON), with operational control (OPCON) remaining with the loaning organization. Representatives of the cognizant agencies would assist in bridging the gap between surveillance and tracking of suspected drug traffic and the end-game apprehension by U.S. or foreign law enforcement agencies (LEAs)<sup>12</sup>. Successful at the tactical level, this system provided for a marked increase in drug interdiction (as measured in metric tons seized or destroyed) during its first several years of existence. Since that time, however, the net flow of illegal drugs has continued to exceed the demand of U.S. drug users. It is presently estimated (since the actual figures would be impossible to figure accurately), that the year end total (1996) of illegal seizures was approximately 300 metric tons. The current demand in the United States is estimated at 350 metric tons, with current South American

production in excess of 700-750 metric tons.<sup>13</sup> Given these figures, it is apparent that the JIATF system, as it presently exists, requires change to further increase its effectiveness.

#### Weaknesses of the Current System.

An obvious weakness of the current system is the overwhelming number of agencies and organizations involved. Short of an actual "war" on drugs, or direct hostilities with the producing countries, this feature cannot easily be avoided. The peculiarities of combining law enforcement, DOD and Departmental agencies must be dealt with in order to maintain a semblance of continuity between the source and end-game missions of defeating illegal narcotics trafficking. A more efficient command structure, however, might alleviate communications and coordination difficulties, and enhance overall mission performance.

Another factor which impacts efficiency is the number of competing task forces that presently exist. The three JIATFs and the DAICC compete for limited surveillance and tracking assets, but more importantly compete for apprehension assets (NLEAs) as well. The ability to establish a seamless and well-coordinated hand-off of suspect air, land and maritime traffic to the appropriate apprehending agency is essential to improved mission success.

Lack of proper coordination between the respective JIATF Directors has also led to gaps in coverage among the

three AORs. As alluded to previously, limited assets for the purpose of tracking make it essential that the efforts of each task force complement the efforts of the other. Without proper sequencing and coordination, drug cartels simply shift transit routes to the area of least resistance. For example, a concerted tracking and surveillance effort by JIATF East in the Caribbean is meaningless without appropriate assets to deny Pacific or land-bridge routes through Central America.

While the C4I structure is quite robust, it too lacks unity of effort in accomplishing the mission. Many of the involved agencies have their own intelligence gathering capability and provide such information as they deem relevant to illegal narcotics operations. At present, the task forces maintain only sufficient intelligence capability as is necessary to support their internal operations.

Finally, the lack of organic assets available to the Joint Task Forces results in a reliance on parent organizations which continue to exercise operational control over the assets they contribute. While not a fatal flaw by any means, the inability of JIATFs to coordinate the massing or positioning of assigned assets in a flexible manner, can only degrade operational effectiveness.

#### Recommendations.

Several changes are possible which might improve the efficiency and effectiveness of interdiction and overall counter-narcotics operations. Reducing the number of task

forces, streamlining the command and control organization, expanding the incorporation of allied support and increasing land interdiction efforts will all serve to improve synergy and increase effectiveness.

The number of JIATFs should be reduced to two, aligning the current responsibilities and AORs with CINCPAC and CINCSOUTH. This will provide for improved coordination and capability while utilizing the existing structures of the two geographic commanders. In particular, capitalizing on the regional focus and expertise of CINCSOUTH will ensure the unity of effort demanded in both interdiction and use of host-nation support. The plan to include the entire Caribbean in CINCSOUTH's AOR, by June 1997, makes this option all the more attractive.

The ability to coordinate both land and maritime interdiction efforts will result in an ability to "surge" efforts and assets to bring about sizable seizures of illegal narcotics, and might possibly drive traffickers to an unacceptable level of cost and risk. Currently, the effect of maritime interdiction has merely forced the bulk of illegal drugs to come through Central America across the southwest border of the United States. Regionally focused efforts could well reduce the flexibility with which the Cartels are able to adapt to transit route operations.

Two problems in redefining the AORs to mirror those of the respective CINCs lie in the size of the areas concerned and the assets available for use. In the case of CINCSOUTH,

the number of naval assets is limited, forcing the task force commander to "borrow" units from the Atlantic Fleet by way of annual planning conferences. This not only limits the flexibility of the JIATF to optimize operations based on intelligence, but also confuses the basic concept of the supported versus supporting commander. Dedicated assets must be made available to each JIATF if this situation is to be reversed.

At present there are multiple "lead" agencies tasked with interdiction and seizure. While DOD is not the appropriate agency to assume the lead role, establishing a single command structure, based loosely on the CINC organizational concept will greatly reduce the friction and coordination problems that presently occur.

Command and control, efficient utilization of resources and adherence to longer-range strategies will all improve with the establishment of a well defined organizational structure. The concept of the U.S. Interdiction Coordinator (USIC) is on the right track. That role must be expanded, however, to properly fuse the efforts of DEA, Customs and other NLEAs. The requirement for a unified effort is demanded if interdiction is to remain a viable part of the anti-narcotics campaign.

Increasing the role of host governments in both interdiction and eradication efforts must also become a cornerstone of future drug operations. Presently, cooperative efforts with Latin countries has been mostly

ineffective in crop eradication and alternative source programs. As mentioned previously the ability to offer serious incentives under poor economic conditions makes these efforts unfeasible by themselves. Current use of allied support in interdiction efforts, however, has shown results.

In order to overcome obstacles presented by international law and sovereignty issues, a strategy of using host-nation ship riders has proven to be quite effective. These "4 and 6-part" agreements provide for carrying foreign personnel aboard interdiction vessels and aircraft<sup>14</sup>. Their authority permits U.S. interdiction assets to follow suspect traffic into sovereign waters and airspace, which is a critical capability in furthering narco seizures. This program will also allow for a possible shift in "national" attitudes by host-nations in combating the narco-trafficking and production, and can easily be tied to other efforts in military cooperation. Involvement can be tied to all facets of international security assistance, and might show significant increases in Latin government commitment to the counter-drug effort.

A recommendation to make counter-drug efforts more effective, to increase land interdiction efforts, will probably be the most difficult to realize. Given that the great majority of drugs entering the U.S. comes via land and air traffic through Mexico, it is of paramount importance that efforts and resources be increased dramatically to

reduce that threat. Given the large border area which needs to be covered, and the paucity of assets currently available to concerned NLEAs, a marked increase in manning and funding will be required. Current Customs and DEA resources fall well short of what is necessary to cause a noticeable impact on cross-border transportation of illegal drugs. As with most programs requiring larger pieces of the federal budget, it must be emphasized to the taxpayer that anything short of a fully funded effort will lead to a failure in both short and long-term objectives.

Devising new Measures of Effectiveness is also an important aspect of future counter-drug policy. The current system of calculating amounts seized is inadequate for planners attempting to gauge effectiveness. Other factors must be added if an accurate picture of efforts is to be realized. The use of street prices, numbers of drug-related fatalities, surveys of users and levels of drug-sponsored terrorism can all provide insight into the effectiveness of a counter-narcotics strategy.

#### **Other Issues.**

While certainly not an answer to all counter-narcotics dilemmas, the above recommendations should at least deliver significant increases in effectiveness and provide for greater coordination. Issues which remain unresolved and will continue to hinder total mission achievement include the extent of the drug problem, the massive area involved in

interdiction and the political, vice military, nature of the solutions.

The fact that the drug problem permeates every level of society and defies a stereotypical answer complicates domestic policy like no other. The ability to educate against, enforce and eventually eradicate illegal drug use in the U.S. is a daunting task. Measures of success in that area are difficult to determine and will force policy-makers to guess at appropriate actions. Also, there is no remedy that can quickly overcome the vast size of the concerned areas. With the exception of land and border interdiction, tailored solutions will be needed. The use of surging and massed efforts, on an unpredictable and fully supported basis, can hopefully put drug smugglers and Cartels off balance and achieve larger tactical successes.

### Conclusion.

The long-term nature of counter-drug efforts requires a serious and persistent effort, based upon dedicated funding and unity of effort. Anything less will prove to be a waste of resources and will ultimately result in strategic failure. As has been shown, no single focus by itself will counter the current narcotics threat to the United States. Source eradication is extremely difficult and is hampered by economic and societal complications existing in the producing countries. The curbing of drug use in the United States is an equally perplexing problem, requiring long-term education programs and resourceful enforcement. The

inability to reduce the supply without impacting domestic violence and criminal activity exacerbates this dilemma. Interdiction, while both costly and marginally effective in its own right, is absolutely necessary in achieving either of the above objectives.

In order to better coordinate diverse missions, and to capitalize on the authority and functionality of individual agencies, a realignment of the current organization and its command structure is crucial. In this way, better unity of effort and more efficient utilization of resources can be obtained. The fusion of intelligence, assets and authority will surely reap increases in mission accomplishment. The alignment of AORs to more closely fit the geographic responsibilities of the two cognizant CINCs will better adapt them to fit existing command structures, and maintain a regional, vice operational, focus. In this way, consistent and effective emphasis can be maintained on combating a problem that will otherwise continue to pose a significant and lethal threat to our own citizens, and works to erode stability within our hemisphere.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Joint Pub 3-07.4, "Joint Counterdrug Operations", II-15.

<sup>2</sup> Edmundo Morales, Cocaine - White Gold Rush in Peru (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1989), 67-86.

<sup>3</sup> President's Commission on Organized Crime, America's Habit-Drug Abuse, Drug Trafficking & Organized Crime 1986, Lkd. "Drug Interdiction".  
<<http://www.calyx.net/~schaffer/GOVPUBS/amhab/amhabc6a.html>>  
16 January 1996, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>5</sup> Murl D. Munger and William W. Mendel, Campaign Planning and the Drug War (U.S. Army War College: Strategic Studies Institute, 1991), 10.

<sup>6</sup> The White House, President, A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1996), 16.

<sup>7</sup> Joint Pub 3-07.4, I-7-10.

<sup>8</sup> Carlos Priani, Drugs in the Americas: Their Influence on International Relations (U.S. Army War College, 1989), 19-20.

<sup>9</sup> Munger and Mendel, 15-17.

<sup>10</sup> Joint Pub 3-07.4, I-10.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., III-7.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with LCDR D. Williams, USN, Operations Officer, JIATF East, Key West, FL: 28 December 1996.

<sup>13</sup> Telephone Conversation with LCDR Chris Hauser, USN, Operations Desk Officer, J-35, Headquarters, U.S. Southern Command, Panama: 17 December 1996.

<sup>14</sup> Williams (Interview).

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