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The Unwinnable Drug War
What Clausewitz Would Tell Us
Eva Bertram and Kenneth Sharpe

Few public officials question the presumption that in order to reduce drug abuse and crime at home, the United States should fight a war against the supply of drugs abroad, destroying coca and opium poppy production, interdicting drug shipments, and targeting producers, processors, and traffickers. Democrats and Republicans compete to out-tough each other on Capitol Hill and the campaign trail with new schemes for cracking down on the foreign drug supply. Evidence of failure in these efforts leads not to a reevaluation of the strategy, but to calls for more funding and more firepower.

The major goal of U.S. drug control policies is to stem drug abuse and addiction, primarily of heroin and cocaine. The U.S. drug war abroad enlists federal law enforcement agencies and the U.S. military in an effort to curb the supply of drugs entering the country. Budgets for drug law enforcement at home and abroad have skyrocketed from roughly $1 billion in 1981 to some $10 billion today. Yet there is no evidence of a decline in the amount of drugs crossing U.S. borders. Cocaine and heroin are still widely available—and in fact less expensive than in 1981. More important, problems of abuse and addiction are more serious today than 15 years ago.

The evidence of failure is obscured by the decline in the number of so-called current users—individuals who have taken drugs within the past month—from 22.3 million in 1985 to 11.7 million in 1993. Although sizable, the drop was largely in casual marijuana use.[1] Meanwhile, the number of heroin addicts has remained at about 600,000 for the last two decades and there are indications it may be growing again. Cocaine (and its derivative, "crack"), which raised few concerns 15 years ago, claimed at least 2.1 million hard-core addicts by 1993. Even the intensive drug war assaults of the mid-to-late 1980s failed to reduce levels of cocaine or heroin abuse. One rough measure of hard-core use is the number of drug-related hospital emergency-room visits. Between 1988 and 1993, cocaine-related emergencies increased by 22 percent, while heroin-related emergencies rose by 65 percent[2]; such increases continued, though at a slower rate, during the first Clinton administration.

Figuring out where the drug war went wrong demands abandoning symbolic politics and simple assumptions about the need to "just fight harder." If we consider the phrase "war on drugs" to be more than a metaphor, and perform a hard-nosed strategic analysis of the overseas drug "war" and its military and law enforcement campaigns, the fatal flaws in the strategy become clear. The place to start is with Karl von Clausewitz's nineteenth-century classic on strategy, *On War*, and its more recent interpretation by such military theorists as Harry G. Summers, former secretary of defense Caspar Weinberger, and the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Colin Powell.

Some Principles from Clausewitz

Two overarching principles derived from Clausewitz provide a framework for evaluating the current drug war strategy. First, *military means must aim at achieving a political end.* A campaign of force should not become an end in itself: "The political object is a goal, war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose." War, says Clausewitz "should never be thought of as something *autonomous* but always as an *instrument of policy*."

A strategic analysis of the use of force in the drug war must first identify the political objective and then clarify the military's mission in meeting that objective. Students of Clausewitz underline the importance of clarity of mission for the successful use of American military force in such cases as the invasion of Panama in 1989 and the Gulf War, and warn of the dangers of unwise or ill-defined missions—such as in Beirut in 1982–84 or in Vietnam in the 1960s. "You must begin," said Colin Powell in 1992, referring to possible U.S. intervention in Bosnia, "with a clear understanding of what political objective is being achieved."

Once the political objective and military mission are clear, Clausewitz would insist that *the means must be both appropriate and adequate*. Much of the public debate regarding the use of military force—and the drug war is no exception here—is over whether the level of force is *adequate*. When this is the only criterion for evaluation, there is a presumption that the failure of force to accomplish a given mission must be due to insufficient force. When faced with failure, the temptation is then to escalate. Clausewitz, however, would first have us ask, Is the use—and type—of force *appropriate* given the objective?

> The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish...the kind of war on which they are embarking: neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive.

"Military force," emphasizes General Powell, "is not always the right answer. If force is used imprecisely or out of frustration rather than clear analysis, the situation can be made worse." These principles—of clarity of the political objective and mission, and of appropriate and adequate means—are useful guides in strategic thinking about the drug war.

Political Objective and Military Mission

The "political object," as Clausewitz would say, of U.S. drug control strategy is to lower drug abuse and addiction and to reduce crime. Current U.S. counternarcotics strategy assumes that such drug problems can best be ameliorated by drastically restricting the supply through prohibiting the sale of drugs. The strategy of targeting the drug supply is designed to make drugs less available and drive up prices—and thus discourage abuse and addiction. The war on supply has been the major focus of the strategy since the early 1980s, absorbing about 70 percent of the drug-war budget. It is supplemented by efforts to reduce use through treatment and prevention—so-called demand-side policies—which have never played more than a minor role in the drug war.

The war on supply is being fought on three fronts (our focus here is on the first two): In the drug-producing "source countries," U.S. military forces and antidrug agencies pressure foreign governments to eliminate coca, opium poppy, and marijuana production (with eradication or crop-substitution programs), and to attack the refining facilities where crops are converted into heroin and cocaine. U.S. forces also work with foreign allies to target drugs at or en route to U.S. borders, using planes, boats, border patrols, and customs officers to interdict drug shipments. And drug enforcement agents and local police go after drugs here at home, by trying to locate, arrest, and prosecute drug dealers and seize drug supplies.

At all three stages, the mission and strategy seem clear: use force and coercion to make it more dangerous and more costly for growers, refiners, smugglers and dealers to produce, transport, and sell drugs—thus driving down production and availability, driving up prices, and discouraging consumers from buying and using drugs.

But in evaluating the strategy's effectiveness, the political objective is often forgotten. The war itself has become "something *autonomous*" instead of "an *instrument of policy*"—precisely as Clausewitz warned—and drug warriors point to the growing numbers of shipments seized, acres eradicated, and traffickers arrested as evidence of success. They do not address the failure to achieve their larger political objective—reducing drug abuse, addiction, and crime—and even overlook the mission's failure to meet its own stated goals of reducing supply and significantly raising prices. Coca leaf production has remained relatively stable.[3] There is no evidence of a reduction in the supply of drugs entering the United States. And perhaps most important, the price of both heroin and cocaine has declined markedly in the last 15 years despite the dramatic escalation of drug-law enforcement.[4]

At the heart of the problem is a lack of clarity of mission. To fight the drug war, Caspar Weinberger argued, "a clear military objective—not just a vague injunction to 'stop the drug traffickers'—must be specified." Yet the primary mission—"to reduce supply"—is just such a vague injunction. The reduction in overseas drug supply required to significantly affect price (and thus levels of abuse and addiction) in the United States is never specified, for example. In the case of cocaine, it is rarely clear whether this means a reduction in the supply of coca and cocaine in the traditional cocaine source countries of Peru, Bolivia, and Colombia, or whether it also means a reduction of supply in Mexico and the other transit countries of Central America and the Caribbean, as well as in the new countries in South America to which the cocaine trade is spreading (such as Brazil, Argentina, and Ecuador) as a result of the drug war in the Andes.

The failure to clearly define objectives and spell out how they will be accomplished through military means creates a temptation to reduce the mission to measurement. Agencies set goals that measure effort but fail to evaluate progress toward meeting objectives. There is a tendency to count the acres of crops eradicated but not the amount of new coca planted, the number of processing labs destroyed but not the number rebuilt or the total processing capacity, the tons of drugs seized but not the total quantity being shipped. Thus U.S. officials point proudly to their success in pressuring Bolivia to meet U.S. coca eradication targets in 1995—but overlook the overall increase in Bolivian coca production from 1994 to 1995.[5]

Such measures of success are the drug-war equivalent of Vietnam-era "body counts." Without clarity about how these accomplishments fulfill the drug war's mission of reducing availability and raising prices, and how the mission serves the political objective of lowering abuse in the United States, these numbers are milestones that fail to mark progress toward any meaningful goal.

Appropriate and Adequate Means

The murkiness surrounding the political objectives and military mission of the drug war is compounded by a lack of attention to the relationship between mission and means. When confronted with evidence of failure, the question most policymakers ask concerns adequacy, not appropriateness: have we used sufficient force? The answer is usually "no." And the most frequent response is to call for an escalation of the war. "For those who say that we can't possibly win the war on drugs, I say we haven't tried," argued Sen. Dennis DeConcini (D-AZ) in 1993, adding, "If this nation expects to wage a true war on drugs, we need to mobilize every resource available to the country and spend whatever it takes until we choke off supply and reduce consumption."

But Washington *has* tried. The annual federal antidrug budget for law enforcement has grown from roughly $53 million in 1970, to about 10 billion for FY 1997; since 1970, the United States has invested roughly $77 billion in domestic and foreign drug enforcement—$74 billion of this since 1981. America now spends some $3 billion a year on its overseas drug wars alone.

Washington could of course spend more and take steps to increase the coordination and efficiency of the drug-war effort—but the debate about force levels and efficiency sidesteps a prior and more important question: is the use of force an *appropriate* means to accomplish the mission of significantly reducing the drug supply?

If we follow Clausewitz, and first establish "the kind of war" on which the statesman and commander are embarking, it is clear that the enemy is not the usual sort. The "enemy" in the drug war is not a foreign army or insurgency, but an economic market. The market, to be sure, is composed of individual growers, traffickers, and dealers who seek profits by selling drugs to U.S. citizens. But these individuals have not joined forces to target the United States or its allies for destruction: they are trying to sell their product to people who want to buy it.

The temptation to identify those involved in this market as "the enemy" misconstrues the problem and generates an inappropriate target for U.S. force. The point was made unintentionally by President Bush, in his 1989 speech calling for the intervention of "America's armed forces" in the drug war: "Who's responsible? Let me tell you straight out. Everyone who uses drugs. Everyone who sells drugs. And everyone who looks the other way." Defining the enemy in terms that included such a vast segment of the population was hyperbole. But the fact remains that given the nature of the drug market, the enemy is everywhere—and thus cannot be targeted for attack.

A closer examination of the logic and results of the war against supply suggests that the use of force and coercion to fight the market in drugs may be a classic case of what Clausewitz warned against: it reflects a misjudgment about the kind of war being fought, an effort to turn it into "something that is alien to its nature." The flaws in the drug-war strategy emerge most clearly in the strategy's paradoxical effect on drug profits, prices, and production and in America's drug-war allies' lack of will to fight Washington's battles.

The Profit Paradox

Waging war against the drug market has the effect of distorting the market in ways that undermine the objective of supply reduction. In the absence of the drug war, drugs such as marijuana, cocaine, and heroin would be easy and cheap to grow and refine, simple to ship and sell, widely sought by consumers, but not particularly profitable. By outlawing such production, distribution, and sales, the drug war creates a black market; drugs remain relatively cheap to make but become far more expensive and spectacularly profitable. Enforcement raises prices by increasing the risks and costs faced by suppliers.

But given the continued demand for illicit drugs, this merchandise also becomes extraordinarily lucrative to produce and sell, precisely *because* government prohibition makes it scarcer and more expensive than it would be otherwise. A legal gram of pure pharmaceutical cocaine that costs about $15 to $20, for example, brings about $140 on the retail black market.[6]

The consequences of this black market logic for the drug-war strategy are not surprising. The drug war has raised prices far higher than they would otherwise have been—and this has undoubtedly deterred some use, abuse, and addiction—but the strategy *has not* been able to raise prices high enough to keep drugs out of reach for most consumers. The strategy's success in artificially raising prices also inflates profits. And these high profits have a paradoxical effect: they provide a steady incentive for drug suppliers to remain in the trade and for new suppliers to enter. Because of this "profit paradox," the "stick" of enforcement intended to discourage black marketeers simultaneously creates a "carrot" (enormous profits), which encourages them. As suppliers pursue these high profits, they keep the supply of drugs up and that keeps prices from rising too high—thus undermining the aim of the policy.

The economic logic behind the drug trade bedevils the drug war in another way: it makes it virtually impossible to identify the enemy's "center of gravity," a critical first step in a successful exercise of force. The center of gravity, Clausewitz explains, is "the hub of all power and movement upon which everything depends...the point against which all energies should be directed." This center varies by country and conflict. It could be the enemy's "army," or "the capital," or "the army of their protector." Among alliances, "it lies in the community of interest, and in popular uprisings it is the personalities of the leaders and public opinion."

But the market character of the drug trade means that there is no permanent, identifiable "center of gravity." It is difficult to contain and suppress any market with force, and this is particularly true in the case of drugs. Cocaine, heroin, and marijuana are easy products to grow, refine, smuggle, and sell, and the trade has low barriers to entry, requiring little skill or start-up capital.

The Hydra Effect

If the market nature of the "enemy" makes its center of gravity elusive, the drug-war strategy exacerbates the problem by creating a moving target for drug warriors. Given the high profits of the trade, campaigns to stamp out drug production and trafficking are at best short lived, and at worst counterproductive. Producers, processors, and traffickers develop sophisticated counterstrategies to circumvent drug enforcement efforts. Growers scale down and hide or replant their crops—often in more remote previously unplanted regions. Processors downsize, camouflage, and relocate their labs. Traffickers create new supply routes and smuggling techniques.

The war on supply thus creates a "hydra effect": growing fields, production labs, and supply routes spring back to life and even expand despite repeated law enforcement efforts. Like the mythical sea serpent that Hercules battled, the drug trade is an evasive enemy: each time one of the hydra's heads is cut off, two more grow in its place. All too often, attempts to suppress the trade in one locale simply encourage new recruits or veteran suppliers to set up operations elsewhere to meet the demand for their product.

Thus, the profit paradox ensures steady recruits to the drug trade and an ample supply of drugs for U.S. markets, and the lack of a "center of gravity" in the drug war ensures that the enemy is always elusive. To overlook the market character of the "enemy" and define it instead as the "drug traffickers," the "cartels," or the "peasant producers," is to mistake the character of the conflict. The record of victories and defeats in drug-war campaigns against cartels, traffickers, and growers over the past 15 years confirms that this flaw in the strategy dooms the drug war to failure.

Despite the best efforts of U.S. antinarcotics forces, for example, seizing drug shipments and arresting traffickers will not significantly cut profits, discourage further shipments, and thus reduce the overall drug supply. According to U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) estimates, Colombian traffickers can, at any given time, store between 70 and 100 tons of cocaine in Mexico—roughly the equivalent of what U.S. agencies seize in the course of an entire year.[7]

The profits are so high, and the production costs so low, that traffickers can easily pay more to refiners—who can easily pay more to growers—in order to keep the profitable supply flowing. The inflated profits mean that "the average drug organization can afford to lose 70 percent to 80 percent of its product and still be profitable," explains one former DEA official. "How do you intend to put that group out of business with a basic policy of trying to suppress its product?"

Nor will fear of arrest discourage smugglers. Traffickers can afford to pay enormous sums to those who transport drugs: a cargo pilot can earn an estimated $250,000 for a 250-kilo shipment.[8] "Somebody is always going to take a chance for that kind of money," said one convicted smuggler. "We didn't care if we lost a bag or two. Even if we lost a whole load, it didn't mean anything." The consequences for the interdiction war are sobering. As one top analyst in the U.S. Congress's General Accounting Office (GAO) put it, "The enormous profits in cocaine trafficking make interdiction losses relatively inconsequential.... Given this huge profit margin, it appears unlikely that interdiction will be a significant cost deterrent to traffickers, regardless of the surveillance support that DOD provides."

Even successful interdiction efforts are undermined by the hydra effect: new smuggling routes simply emerge elsewhere. In Southeast Asia, for example, the success of antinarcotics efforts in discouraging heroin trafficking from Burma through Thailand en route to the United States encouraged the development of at least three major new routes, according to State Department officials. The routes lead through Laos and then through southern China, Cambodia, or Vietnam. "Trafficking routes have spread like a cancer to all these countries," said Assistant Secretary of State Robert Gelbard in 1995.

Closer to home, U.S. officials were proud of the significant drop in cocaine smuggling after intense interdiction efforts in southern Florida in the 1980s. But before long, traffickers responded by shifting to air drops over the Caribbean Sea for pickup by boat. When enforcers caught up with this tactic, traffickers switched to new shipping routes through northern Mexico.

Similarly, marijuana interdiction efforts in the 1970s and 1980s were successful in raising the domestic price of the drug, but the higher prices then encouraged U.S. growers to enter the market. Marijuana is now a major cash crop in the United States, with 100,000 to 200,000 commercial growers and industry earnings estimated at billions of dollars annually.[9] Moreover, many former marijuana smugglers switched to transporting cocaine, which is less bulky relative to its dollar value and therefore easier to conceal, as well as more profitable—and far more dangerous to U.S. consumers.

Efforts to convince source country governments to use force directly against the cartels have at times been successful, providing a tangible victory over an identifiable enemy. But the market character of the problem makes success here short-lived, too. In Colombia, for example, in the months following the U.S.-backed crackdown on the Medellín cartel in the fall of 1989, cocaine processing and trafficking dropped significantly. But the disruption was temporary. Production quickly recovered, nearly reaching previous levels within six months.

The weakening of the Medellín cartel allowed the competing Cali cartel to boost its share of the cocaine market. When the government cracked down on the Cali cartel in 1995, younger and more violent trafficking groups began to replace it in the cocaine and heroin trades. Senior Colombian officials, pleased at their success against the Cali drug lords, nevertheless predicted that the hydra effect would lead to a more dispersed and deadlier drug trade, and to greater problems for neighboring countries. Their predictions have been confirmed, as Mexican druglords have risen to new prominence, and drug mafias emerge in Bolivia, Peru, Venezuela, and Brazil.

The market logic is not complicated. The equivalent of major corporations in an oligopolistic market, the cartels shape market structure and behavior through control over barriers to entry (such as economies of scale and marketing channels). Busting up the cartels, like trust-busting, breaks the oligopoly—and creates a freer market in drugs. But dispersing these centers of gravity does not significantly reduce supply. The most successful U.S. military effort to date to "destroy" a drug lord, Panama's military dictator Gen. Manuel Noriega, did not stop drugs from flowing through that country; it simply made the market less concentrated.

Efforts to reduce supply by going after peasant growers—eradicating their crops, using the stick of sanctions or even the carrot of subsidies for crop substitution—are also doomed by the logic of the market. From an Andean peasant's perspective, coca brings many times the price of competing crops. A coca farmer in the Bolivian Chapare region could net up to $2,600 per hectare annually from coca production in the late 1980s, more than four times what he could earn from cultivating the two most profitable legal crops traditionally grown in the region, oranges and avocados. What is more, coca is easy to grow on poor soil and inexpensive to process. The market is virtually assured: traffickers fly into remote areas and pay peasants up front.

In this context, U.S. efforts to give peasants economic incentives to switch to other crops are undermined by the high profits of drug production. Bolivian coca growers, for example, knowing that legal crops could not compete, sometimes accepted the $2,000 per hectare offered for voluntarily eradicating their coca crops, but then destroyed only part of their crop or planted coca on new sites.[10] And there are always other peasants willing to take up the slack in production.

Forceful efforts to eradicate crops have succeeded in removing acreage from production, but not in significantly reducing overall production levels. Crop eradication has simply led peasants to replant elsewhere. Given the profit incentive and the ease of growing coca, the potential for expansion is immense, creating conditions for almost infinite supply. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has estimated that there are 2.5 million square miles in South America alone that are suitable for coca production; coca is currently cultivated on less than 1 percent of suitable land in Peru and Bolivia.[11]

As the trade disperses in response to the drug war, it becomes less detectable and more impervious to the efforts of enforcers. A congressional report concluded that increased law enforcement in the Andes has "helped lead to an ironic, and undesirable, result: the dispersion of the drug trade to other nations in South America." One State Department official put the problem more succinctly: "It's like hitting mercury with a hammer."

A similar phenomenon occurs here in the United States. "Search and destroy" missions against domestic marijuana cultivation confront the same obstacles as Andean enforcement efforts. Farmers plant marijuana in between rows of corn to avoid detection by overflights. In response to DEA eradication campaigns launched in 1982, many growers moved their marijuana cultivation indoors, or underground into large subterranean bunkers, to avoid discovery. As a result of this war on supply at home, indoor growers have developed high-technology techniques, permitting them to harvest greater yields of a more potent product.

Unwilling U.S. Allies

The market character of the drug war "enemy" systematically undermines the war on supply in yet another way: it undermines the coalition warfare on which the strategy depends. In both the source and transit countries, the war on supply depends on the cooperation of America's foreign allies, particularly on their government officials and their military and police forces. This raises a critical issue that Clausewitz identified: "One country may support another's cause, but will never take it so seriously as it takes its own."

Over the past 15 years, many U.S. allies have undertaken costly drug-war campaigns under threat of U.S. sanctions, and all have acknowledged that the drug trade has exacted a price in violence, instability, and environmental destruction in their countries. Yet the fact remains that U.S. allies simply have not assumed the cause of the U.S. drug war as their own. Recent sanctions imposed against Colombia are a case in point. After an investment of over $500 million in U.S. antinarcotics campaigns over the past six years, the Clinton administration announced in March 1996 that it could not certify that Colombia is cooperating effectively with U.S. drug-war efforts.

Drug czar (and former army general) Barry McCaffrey has noted the problem, admitting that "we lack an international coalition" in the Andean source countries that is enthusiastic about counternarcotics campaigns.

The issue of political will is equally serious in major transit countries such as Mexico. "An army of 10,000 Americans could not win the war against drugs in Mexico," stated the U.S. ambassador to Mexico in June 1995. "The key lies with the Mexicans, who must be committed and involved." What is less appreciated is why it is inevitable that U.S. allies will be restricted in their ability and limited in their will to make America's drug war their own in any permanent or sustained way.

One reason these would-be allies do not share U.S. interests in fighting the drug war is that their other national priorities are simply overwhelming. For Andean leaders, for example, cocaine plays a role in economic and political survival. Struggling to comply with strict austerity budgets and international debt payment schedules, Andean countries are hesitant to adopt economically risky drug policies. The jobs and revenues generated by the cocaine trade help maintain the Bolivian and Peruvian economies.

In Peru, where the legal economy is now on the rebound but unemployment remains punishingly high, the coca industry provides hundreds of thousands of jobs and is one of the country's largest sources of foreign exchange revenues.[12] The drug economy in Bolivia employed roughly 500,000 people in the early 1990s, about 20 percent of the work force.[13] When Bolivia's president Jaime Paz Zamora met President Bush at the Cartagena drug summit in February 1990, he pointed out that over half of his country's imports were financed by the coca/cocaine traffic, and 70 percent of its real GNP was cocaine-related. According to Flavio Machicado, Bolivia's former finance minister, "If narcotics were to disappear overnight, we would have rampant unemployment. There would be open protest and violence."

His fears were borne out in late 1995, when U.S. pressures on Bolivia to forcibly eradicate large quantities of coca triggered massive social unrest and political upheaval. Conflicts between antinarcotics forces and coca growers left seven dead, dozens wounded, and hundreds under arrest, according to Bolivian sources and the Washington Office on Latin America, a U.S. human rights organization. Similar conflicts erupted in Colombia in mid-1996, when soldiers opened fire on thousands of coca farmers who were protesting government plans to eradicate their crops; two farmers were killed.

Like Andean government officials, the Latin security forces charged with carrying out the U.S. drug strategy on the ground have little real interest in joining the antidrug campaign. They may want U.S. equipment and aid, but if they have any real military concern, it is in battling leftist insurgencies, not drugs. This reluctance to make the drug war a national priority is compounded by the systemic corruption engendered by the market character of the drug-war enemy.

This endemic corruption is rooted in the high profits that make it rational for government officials and police and military officers to "trade" their enforcement capabilities for a share of the profits. Their low salaries make it difficult for their professional or national loyalties to compete with traffickers' bribes. A policeman involved in antidrug operations in Bolivia described his reasoning, "So how do I survive? Well, you've guessed, corruption. There's lots of it.... Imagine what you would do. If we go out on a raid and a trafficker shows us a $100 bill, with the resources we have, what do you think we do? We think of our families. We take the money."

One DEA official explained that corruption "permeates all levels of the antinarcotics forces" in Bolivia; an antinarcotics "officer simply has to instruct his guys not to search some traffickers at a particular checkpoint for three days and he earns a lifetime's salary." Antidrug officials may go beyond simply "overlooking" drug activity, and actively assist the drug traffickers. "We know as a fact that the Peruvian Army gets payments for letting traffickers use airstrips," states a U.S. Special Forces commander. Colombian trafficker José Gonzalo Rodriguez Gacha made multimillion-dollar payoffs to entire brigades of the army. In Mexico, drug lord Juan García Abrego had as his patron the brother of President Carlos Salinas de Gotari, and bribed the highest echelons of the government.

In mid-1995, more than a dozen Colombian congressmen, the state comptroller, and the attorney general were indicted for accepting payoffs from the Cali cartel; the cartel also allegedly contributed to the successful election campaign of President Ernesto Samper. A year later, in July 1996, similar allegations were leveled against Panamanian president Ernesto Perez Balladares, who acknowledged accepting campaign contributions from a company controlled by a drug trafficker. At times, corruption is so extensive that entire militaries and even state leaders use their power to actively participate in the drug trade—as in the cases of Panama under Manuel Noriega in the 1980s and Bolivia under Gen. Luis García Meza's regime in the early 1980s.

Drug enforcement agents know that this corruption exists. "The 'moral' factors of corruption and national will" are more complex than the physical factors of training and equipment, observes a DEA report, "requiring progress in tangible and intangible areas beyond the scope of law enforcement." But many U.S. officials assume that increased military and law enforcement assistance, combined with diplomatic pressure, will significantly reduce the institutionalized corruption and give the police and military the will to fight. They can identify successful cases in which U.S. pressure has forced the removal of a corrupt official by other officials anxious to secure continued U.S. assistance.

But such steps do not address the systemic problem of drug-related corruption. Further, the more effective U.S. training is in making local enforcement agencies efficient in fighting the drug trade, the greater the incentive for traffickers to bribe local drug fighters—and the greater the opportunity for wide-scale corruption. Ironically, then, the more aggressive the antidrug campaign, the more corruption may spread. "As long as the trade is illicit," explained Colombia's prosecutor general Gustavo De Greiff in 1994, "the narcotraficantes will continue to receive these immense profits that allow them to corrupt everyone."

An Interminable "Limited War"

The drug-war strategy thus reflects both a failure to identify a clear political objective and military mission, and the use of inappropriate means—force and coercion—to reduce supply. Failing to understand the market nature of the drug trade ensures an interminable "limited war," one in which the means will never accomplish the mission of significantly lowering the overseas drug supply

More troubling still is the fact that even success in the mission of significantly reducing overseas supply through force and coercion would fail to meet the larger political objective for which the war is being fought: raising the street price of drugs in the United States enough to reduce drug abuse and addiction. This is because the actual costs of growing and processing illegal drugs abroad are only a minimal part of the street price in the United States. At the point of export, the price of cocaine is still only *3 to 5 percent* of the price a U.S. consumer will pay. Even the smuggling costs—from Colombia to the United States—account for *less than 5 percent* of the retail price.

This means that a wildly successful crop eradication program that tripled the leaf price of coca would raise cocaine prices in the United States by only 1 percent. It means that if U.S. interdiction programs were to seize 50 percent of all cocaine shipped from Colombia—an impossibly high figure—this would add less than 3 percent to the retail price of cocaine in the United States.[14] Author Mathea Falco puts the inevitable failure of a supply-side drug strategy even more simply: only four Boeing 747 cargo planes or thirteen trailer trucks could supply U.S. cocaine consumption for a year; the annual U.S. demand for heroin could be met by a twenty-square-mile field.[15]

The lack of clarity in the relationship between the political objective, the mission, and the means employed risks making the war on supply an end in itself, "something autonomous," not "an instrument of policy." Once waging the drug war is an end in itself, the strategy becomes impossible to evaluate with objective criteria. Rather, the drug war is being embraced for its symbolic value, as a demonstration of America's national will, a signal of U.S. opposition to drugs and Washington's determination to "be tough."

Fighting a war against a drug market will never succeed in limiting supply or raising prices enough to significantly reduce abuse and addiction, regardless of how much we invest in the effort. Yet the prospects for reevaluation and reform look dim. In today's world, few public officials have had the courage to say the emperor's drug war has no clothes—or to launch a serious debate on how to address the nation's drug problems.●

Notes

1. Office of National Drug Control Policy, *National Drug Control Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1995), pp. 17–20.

2. Estimates are from: President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice, *Narcotics and Drug Abuse* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1967), pp. 2–8; Office of National Drug Control Policy, *National Drug Control Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1994), pp. 1, 12–14; and Office of National Drug Control Policy, *National Drug Control Strategy*, 1995, pp. 18–20, 138, 143. These statistics underestimate the number of hard-core users because the household survey data and high school surveys on which they are based do not include the homeless, persons in prisons or other institutionalized settings, or high school dropouts, groups that account for many such users.

3. Administration statistics show that the metric tons of coca leaf produced between 1989 and 1994, when drug-war outlays were at their peak, remained essentially stable, decreasing by about 1 percent.

4. The street price in 1994 dollars of a gram of pure cocaine plummeted from roughly $1,100 to about $175; of a gram of pure heroin from about $3,800 to roughly $1,000 (Eva Bertram et al., *Drug War Politics: The Price of Denial* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996], appendix B).

5. Cited in Coletta Youngers, "The Andean Quagmire: Rethinking U.S. Drug Control Efforts in the Andes," March 1996, Washington Office on Latin America, Washington D.C., p. 2.

6. Mark H. Moore, "Supply Reduction and Drug Law Enforcement," in *Drugs and Crime*, ed.

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9. Ralph A. Weisheit, *Domestic Marijuana: A Neglected Industry* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), pp. 31–39; Eric Schlosser, "Reefer Madness," *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1994, pp. 59–62; Michael Pollan, "How Pot Has Grown," *New York Times Magazine*, February 19, 1995, p. 32.

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