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# Illicit Drugs and the Americas

## Avoiding a *Pax Mafiosa*

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### THE DILEMMA

After more than four decades of an enduring U.S. policy on illicit psychoactive substances, the narcotics question is emerging once again as a pressing national concern. Briefly stated, the “drug war” has not worked, and U.S. citizens feel that drug abuse requires substantial attention at both individual and societal levels. While a large majority of the U.S. public considers the drug problem to be growing worse, most politicians, bureaucrats, and decision makers shy away from substantive discussion on this issue. Unfortunately, problems do not vanish because they are not addressed. Rather, this politics of denial has resulted in the justification of a continuous crusade on drugs, without accountability.

During the last 20 years, nearly \$450 billion in federal, state, and local resources has been devoted to different anti-drug activities, with limited success in reducing decisively the demand for narcotics in the United States. Although the level of consumption of a variety of natural and synthetic illegal drugs has not approached that of the mid-1980s, it is nonetheless high. According to independent studies and official reports on this topic, the United States currently has close to 18 million illicit drug consumers aged 12 years or older.<sup>1</sup> Heroin consumption grew during the 1990s, and the crack epidemic of the 1980s did not subside completely. Furthermore,

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the abuse of amphetamines is acute, ecstasy remains popular, and cocaine is still eagerly demanded by heavy users.

After spending many billions of dollars to control the drug phenomenon, why have anti-drug policies not worked effectively? It is evident that the national and international drug control strategies over the last four

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U.S. administrations have been flawed. Neither Ronald Reagan, George Bush, and George W. Bush's rhetorically "tough" nor Bill Clinton's silently "soft" prohibitionism has led to any major improvements. If abstinence is the critical target of prohibition, statistics on first-time drug use levels of abuse, drug-related criminality, and youth drug-initiation year demonstrate that this goal is groundless and costly.<sup>2</sup>

The pillars of the current U.S. drug control strategy are manifold and intertwined: reduce the value of production and improve eradication to discourage peasants from cultivating illicit crops; strengthen interdiction at processing and transit points, with the purpose of decreasing the availability and potency of drugs in the United States; and improve the interception of drug shipments at U.S. borders so as to elevate the domestic price of narcotics and thus deter the entrance of additional potential consumers into the drug market. Notwithstanding these efforts and the unprecedented number of federal (greater than 50 percent) and state (greater than 30 percent) inmates sentenced for drug-related offenses,<sup>3</sup> this policy is close to collapse. Today in the United States, most illegal drugs are more readily available—with greater purity and at a lower price—than in the early 1980s.

The heavily ideological and highly repressive supply-oriented drug policies—designed and implemented by both Republicans and Democrats—have been a failure at home and abroad. The categorization of drugs as an overwhelming national security threat and the rising involvement of the military in ill-defined law enforcement tasks inside and outside the United States have been both unnecessary and inappropriate. The notion that the domestic narcotics problem is the result of alien forces located, for example, in Peru (a producer of coca), Jamaica (a producer of marijuana), Morocco (a producer of hashish), or Laos (a producer of opium) is spurious and overly simplistic.

As a consequence of this unsuccessful anti-drug strategy, there have been few winners and many losers. Organized crime in the United States and

transnational criminal organizations in Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as in southern and central Europe, southeast and southwest Asia, and the former Soviet Union, grew richer and more powerful. Meanwhile, U.S. citizens have become less safe and increasingly victimized. In fact, the imposition of harsher legal enforcement constraints upon pleasures, vices, and desires has only exacerbated violence and corruption, as it had been previously the case with prostitution, alcohol, and other forbidden preferences and commodities. Paradoxically, perhaps the only way that illicit drugs could be eliminated altogether would be to impose limitations and restrictions on society to an extent that would constitute a threat to both democratic institutions and capitalist economics.

Therefore, the problem of drug-consumption cannot be solved solely through foreign policy or military strategy. The narcotics issue depends on demand, and it has social and national implications, along with global ramifications and linkages. The solution is not necessarily domestic legalization or external intervention. Instead, regarding illicit drugs, government officials should follow Carl von Clausewitz's advice: it is vital to understand the "enemy's center of gravity," the pivotal place "on which everything depends" and "against which all our energies should be directed."<sup>4</sup> That center of gravity is the drug-consuming societies themselves.

As opposed to embarking on a new anti-drug crusade or engaging in a protracted debate for and against prohibition, concerned governments could institute a harm-reduction policy at the individual and social levels, both in terms of health and law. The primary focus would be to limit and minimize the negative effects of drug use, instead of trying to attain the unrealistic chimera of abstention.

Community-based programs that are better funded, demand oriented, and have a wider and more serious long-term emphasis on prevention, treatment, education, and rehabilitation are needed urgently. Instead of spending excessive resources on internal and external interdiction, short-term control projects within the source country, and domestic criminal enforcement, the U.S. Government must invest more in helping its own heavy users—particularly crack, cocaine, and heroin addicts—and on decreasing the transmission of HIV/AIDS among and from drug consumers.

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At the international level, Washington could reduce bilateral counter-narcotic aid to countries and increase its contributions to multilateral organizations involved in drug-reduction activities. Each year the United States provides several hundred million dollars in assistance to developing nations to contain drug cultivation, processing, and trafficking. Meanwhile, it dedicates less than 0.05 percent of its federal anti-drug resources to multinational efforts to mitigate the drug phenomenon, in terms of both demand and supply.<sup>5</sup> If, as Washington often repeats, illegal drugs are a transnational phenomenon, then well-coordinated and economically-supported global initiatives must be encouraged.

Societies in developing countries affected by illicit drugs need legal trade relations and positive political, cultural, and financial associations with the United States and its citizenry. Blaming Mexico for the high consumption of marijuana in the United States, chastising Myanmar for the domestic rise of heroin addiction, or identifying Bolivia as a scapegoat for the growth of cocaine abuse will solve neither the U.S. drug problem nor the worldwide difficulties resulting from the lucrative illegal narcotics enterprise. It is misleading to assume that the unilateral stances maintained by the United States during the Cold War are still consistent, feasible, or pragmatic today. Drugs are the paradigmatic example of what the former President of the Council on Foreign Relations, Bayless Manning, called in the mid-1970s an “intermestic” issue: “simultaneously, profoundly, and inseparably both domestic and international.”<sup>6</sup>

In order to address the drug problem imaginatively and effectively, Washington should broaden its options instead of concentrating on a single, blind, and punitive alternative. Additionally, it is essential for the United States to avoid approaching the drug dilemma from a narrow perspective that emphasizes closed autonomy, unrestricted sovereignty, and complete autarky. Thus, an effective response requires the combination of a more humanitarian domestic policy toward drug demand based on harm reduction and an enlightened international policy on narcotics supported by a judicious multilateralism. These approaches would likely help to alleviate, and even to resolve gradually, the renewed and profound crisis generated by illicit psychoactive substances.

#### **THE TEST CASE: THE SIDE EFFECTS OF ILLICIT DRUGS**

There is an urgent need for new thinking on U.S.-Latin American narco-politics, to cite a concrete example of narco-diplomacy.<sup>7</sup> Relations between Washington and many Latin American capitals have deteriorated

increasingly in recent years. In North, Central, and South America, the drug phenomenon has created enormous social, political, ecological, and military difficulties. Massive human rights abuses, environmental catastrophes, unbalanced civil-military relations, institutional corruption, concentration of power in drug mafias, and law enforcement failures are some of the side effects produced by a “war on drugs” focused mistakenly on the supply side of the narcotics question.

New budget increases and larger antinarcotics bureaucracies in both the United States and Latin America have not produced any noticeable improvement. Drug-related violence in urban centers throughout the hemisphere—from the United States to Brazil—is soaring. Unsurprisingly, no one is assuming responsibility for this failed public policy in the Americas. A combination of U.S. moral imperialism on the drug issue and Latin American narco-nationalism<sup>8</sup> could prove fatal for the inter-American system. A mature, inventive, and preventive narcotics strategy between the United States and Latin America would serve to establish a reasonable framework by which to evaluate the actual reduction of drug demand, as well as the effective control of supply in both the short term and long term.

The effect of the drug phenomenon in Latin America and the Caribbean has been devastating at environmental, social, political, and economic levels. In the early 1980s, only Bolivia and Peru were major producers of coca, while Colombia was the main site of processing coca paste into cocaine.

Today, at the outset of a new millennium, the Andean ridge (including Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela) is a producer of coca leaves of various qualities and in multiple quantities. The geographical dispersion of coca cultivation has meant that more than two million hectares of the Amazon basin, shared by these five countries, have been destroyed through deforestation, soil degradation, the chemical precursors used to transform coca into cocaine, and the chemical fumigation of coca crops conducted by the government authorities.

Moreover, today these Andean countries epitomize the dark side of regional politics. They are poster children for massive poverty, a growing drug industry, gross human rights violations, rising organized crime, environmental exhaustion, and rampant corruption. As they descend into

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turmoil, the Andean countries are becoming a serious security concern for both South and North America.<sup>9</sup>

In particular, the two most dramatic examples of narcotics-related human rights violations have been in Peru and Colombia. The growing military assistance provided by the United States to most coca-producing and trafficking nations has fueled the dramatic level of violence in the Andes. Both Plan Colombia (2000) and the Andean Regional Initiative (2002)—which together have accounted for more than \$4.5 billion in U.S. Government expenditures<sup>10</sup>—have had negligible results in lowering drug consumption, reducing the availability of psychoactive substances, and diminishing the purity of available narcotics in the United States. This amount of aid, devoted mostly to military and law enforcement, has had no noticeable effect on dismantling criminal drug activities conducted by regional groups. The so-called Cali and Medellín cartels, which were large, centralized, hierarchical organizations, had already disappeared by the late 1990s. However, the perpetuation of misguided and flawed antinarcotics policies contributed to the “democratization” of the drug phenomenon; today, there are hundreds of network-like, efficient, and covert drug organizations throughout Latin America. This new brand of drug organization consists of “boutique cartels,” small, clan-like associations that are more transnational—linked to multiple forms of trafficking and organized crime groups, less visible and familiar to the general public, and more entrepreneurial and sophisticated in their behavior. Several of these *cartelitos* have flourished in the Andes, the Southern Cone, Central America, and the Caribbean.

Furthermore, the civil-military balance in the Andean region has shifted in favor of the latter during the last two decades, with the military apparatus increasing its involvement in counter-narcotics tasks that, in reality, should fall under the domain of the police and law enforcement agencies. This transformation of the institutional framework of security has contributed to the consolidation of non-liberal democracies in the region. According to Fareed Zakaria, these illiberal democracies are classified as such because, although they held regular elections, they do not uphold the rule of law, maintain a clear division of powers, or instill an institutional respect for basic civil rights.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, in Mexico, Colombia, Bolivia, and several Caribbean islands, the degree of narco-corruption has reached the upper echelons of government. High officials, from prime ministers and presidents to cabinet members, congressmen, and security forces, have been bought directly or influenced indirectly by drug monies. This generates a concrete fear that if

the drug phenomenon is not addressed with new proposals and bold policies, it could lead to the establishment of narcostates in the near future.

Another related phenomenon is the collapse of judicial systems in Latin America and the Caribbean. This situation is prevalent due to the use of violence and the threat of force, bribery, and corruption undertaken by highly skillful mafias. Drug syndicates, now more global than ever, are operating in North, Central, and South America, and they have strained greatly the law enforcement capabilities of most countries.

On the economic side, many Caribbean islands and several small Latin American countries are witnessing the emergence of financial havens within their borders, which could have substantial negative medium-term and long-term effects on their economies. Furthermore, the lack of strong systems of financial controls is common, and drug-related financing is playing an important role in political contests. Thus, unprecedented economic, social, and political problems are looming in the horizon, from Uruguay to St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and from Guatemala to Paraguay.

Finally, the linkage between drugs and terrorism is self-evident in Colombia and may be growing in the area of *la Triple Frontera* (the tri-border region including Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay). Washington has not devised a consensual and coherent policy with its Latin American and Caribbean counterparts vis-à-vis these dual and often intertwined threats. The clear failure of the “war on drugs” and the repetition of the same mistakes in combating highly organized violence may simply be the prologue for a failed “war on terrorism.”

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## THE THREAT

While the notion of *Pax Americana* has been used to convey the hegemony of the United States,<sup>12</sup> there is an ongoing debate about Washington’s capacity and willingness to command the international system single-handedly. As the controversy unfolds, the world may be witnessing the gradual consolidation of a hemispheric *Pax Mafiosa*: the growing power, and even the growing legitimacy, of a new criminal social class with the ability, commitment, and opportunity to lead.

This new criminal class is unrestrained politically and dispersed

geographically, and it exercises what Berenice Carroll, a researcher on the power of the weak, defines as “disintegrative power”<sup>13</sup>: the capacity to erode and destroy established social, political, and economic institutions with challenging and violent actions that illustrate the limits and injustices of the prevailing system. This criminal class has been empowered internationally by militant drug prohibition, the technological revolution, and economic globalization. It is reactionary rather than revolutionary and essentially undemocratic. The epitome of this new criminal class is the Colombian paramilitaries: a mixture of local politicians, large landowners, security forces, and drug dealers linked by a right-wing and anti-insurgent ideology, interest in guaranteeing their investments and avoiding any type of social or economic reform, and shared values and beliefs in armed politics as a means to improve their relative power.

The states and citizenries of the Americas must avoid the nightmare scenario that could be created by a gradual, unchecked displacement of the current and overwhelmingly fragile elites by these criminal elements. Some rural portions of Colombia, certain urban ghettos in Los Angeles and Rio de Janeiro, several areas in Paraguay, and various corners of the Caribbean are microcosms of what might happen on a larger scale if the *Pax Mafiosa* becomes consolidated at national and hemispheric levels in the years to come.

The empowerment of a new criminal elite through money laundering is at the heart of this *Pax Mafiosa*. According to the former director of the International Monetary Fund, Michel Camdessus, estimates of world money laundering range from two percent to five percent of global Gross Domestic Product—that is, between \$600 billion and \$1.8 trillion per year. Furthermore, according to U.S. Senator Carl Levin (D-MI), half of these monies come through the United States.<sup>14</sup> Just as some U.S. citizens are addicted to drugs, several U.S. corporations and banks seem addicted to dirty money. The lack of significant results from attempts to curtail money laundering is not due to domestic technical and legal difficulties, or to the lack of efforts on the part of U.S. allies and counterparts. On the contrary, the most critical and limiting factor is political: the traditional but dangerous double standard of the United States when dealing with threats to its national security.

During the Cold War, authoritarianism and dictatorship, rather than democracy, were supported by Washington in the developing world, because these forces were helpful in the struggle against communism. Since the end of the Cold War, rather than matching the actual performance of countries in their fights against narcotics, the annual drug certification



process has been manipulated by the White House to serve external geopolitical and internal electoral interests. The differences in the annual certification processes for countries that cooperate with the United States in the fight against drugs and countries that do not is illustrative.

During the mid-1990s, Colombia was decertified and Mexico was fully certified, even though Bogota was dismantling the Cali cartel and reinstating the extradition of its nationals to the United States, while Mexico was witnessing a noticeable upsurge in drug trafficking and drug-related violence. Washington demonstrated that it was tough on drugs by coercing Colombia, while the U.S. administration protected its new NAFTA partner by reducing pressure on the drug issue. A decade later, there is an explosive situation in Mexico due to the empowerment of organized crime and drug lords,<sup>15</sup> and Colombia is still the major source of cocaine and a significant exporter of heroin.

Acceptance of and participation in the United States' "war against terrorism" could become for some countries a blank check to evade the responsibility of combating money laundering or even drug trafficking. The most dramatic outcome of this cynical, excessively pragmatic, and unprincipled rationality may be the uncontrolled growth of *Pax Mafiosa* in the Americas.

Consequently, the Western Hemisphere should encourage collective and innovative thinking to create a new consensus on controlling illicit drugs. This task cannot be addressed solely by a governmental policy or a state initiative. There is a need for citizen diplomacy across the Americas to bring a necessary diversity of proposals to the social and political debate on drugs. A continuation of the same policies would be absurd. A broad coalition in favor of new ideas will enlighten the ongoing poor debate on narcotics. At the very least, this might be a productive starting point to overcome the negative impact of drug use on the lives of the men and women of the continent. ■

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**ENDNOTES**

1 See the figures on drug use and abuse in the United States and abroad in, among others, *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, World Drug Report 2006* and U.S. Department of State, *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, 2005* (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2005).

- 2 See, among others, Robert J. MacCoun and Meter Reuter, *Drug War Heresies: Learning from Other Vices, Times & Places* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) and Ethan Nadelmann, "The U.S. is Addicted to War on Drugs," *Globe and Mail*, May 20, 2003, 13.
- 3 See U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Drug and Crime Facts*, <[www.ojp.gov/bjs/dcf/contents.htm](http://www.ojp.gov/bjs/dcf/contents.htm)> (accessed February 11, 2006).
- 4 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), 595-596.
- 5 This figure was calculated based on the bilateral and international counternarcotic aid of the United States, which appears in the Office of National Drug Control Policy, *National Drug Control Strategy*, February 2006 (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2006).
- 6 Bayless Manning, "The Congress, the Executive, and Intermestic Affairs: Three Proposals," *Foreign Affairs* 55 (1) (January 1997): 306-324.
- 7 U.S.-Latin American narcopolitics should be placed in the context of what I call "the frustrated superpower syndrome," in which a region is deemed irrelevant by a major power, because it is considered nonthreatening or unimportant due to cultural bias and/or negligible material significance. Thus, the region receives intermittent attention from the superpower. The bureaucratic politics surrounding "low value" regions are largely a rerun of past scenarios. Occasionally, the hope of a breakthrough raises expectations that the region somehow will be "transformed," but disappointment ensues. Once and again, the same time-tested, largely ineffective strategy is employed and the outcome is identical: no major achievements and no great transformation. Then frustration sets in. In the end, the superpower actually has no intention of rethinking its relations with the region. Juan Gabriel Tokatlian, "America Should Look More Often In Its Own Backyard," *Financial Times*, March 9, 2006, 9.
- 8 "Narconationalism" is a subset of nationalism that is mobilized by drug lords in reaction to a loss of sovereignty by the home nation due to U.S. pressures and demands. Drug lords oppose their extradition to the United States, the presence of U.S. and foreign advisors in a country affected by the drug business, and tough global policies on money laundering.
- 9 Several key questions regarding the Andean ridge have been either downplayed or distorted by Washington. First, the forces behind the Bolivarian revolution, led by Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, will continue their efforts to be emulated in the area. Chávez's growing domestic power and high visibility abroad provide additional momentum for this aspiration, and stigmatizing Chávez or encouraging the most extreme elements of the opposition will trigger a civil war in Venezuela. Second, the Colombian armed conflict is barely stabilized, contrary to claims by some Western officials. Notwithstanding President Alvaro Uribe's hard-line policies, the radical guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia are not defeated and the so-called peace process with right-wing paramilitaries is extremely fragile. Third, Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador are becoming partially failed states, unable to cope with increasing social and ethnic demands after more than a decade of neoliberal reforms. Rather than constituting a domino effect, each country is witnessing an individual crisis in its traditional leadership and uncertainty about whether the replacement of its elites will be peaceful or violent. Choice and circumstance may interact virtuously or viciously.
- 10 See details of funding in Center for International Policy, Report on Colombia, U.S. Military and Police Aid, "The 2006 Aid Package," <[www.ciponline.org/colombia/aid06.htm](http://www.ciponline.org/colombia/aid06.htm)> (accessed November 22, 2006); K. Larry Storrs and Connie Veillette, "Andean Regional Initiative (ARI): FY 2003 Supplemental and FY 2004 Assistance for Colombia and Neighbours," *CRS Report For Congress*, 2003; and Connie Veillette, "Plan Colombia: A Progress Report," *CRS Report For Congress*, January 2006.
- 11 Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Democracy: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003).
- 12 See, among others, Norman K. Swazo, "Primacy or World Order? The New Pax Americana," *International Journal on World Peace* 21 (1) (March 2004); Andrew J. Bacevich, ed., *The Imperial Tense: Prospects and Problems of American Empire* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2003); and Stephen M. Walt, *Taming American Power: The Global Responses to U.S. Primacy* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005).

- 13 Berenice Carroll, "Peace Research: The Cult of Power," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 16 (4) (December 1972): 585-616.
- 14 On Camdessus' estimates, see U.S. Department of Treasury, *The 2001 National Money Laundering Strategy*, 2001 (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, September 2001). Regarding Senator Levin's reference, see <[www.levin.senate.gov/newsroom/supporting/2004/071504psireport.pdf](http://www.levin.senate.gov/newsroom/supporting/2004/071504psireport.pdf)> (accessed March 5, 2007).
- 15 According to a recent article by Mexican scholar Sergio Aguayo Quezada, by 2007, organized crime groups have become "capable of imposing their law in 40% of Mexican territory." Sergio Aguayo Quezada, "Mexico: Living with Drugs," in <[www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-protest/drugs\\_mexico\\_4442.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-protest/drugs_mexico_4442.jsp)> (accessed March 30, 2007).

