

ILLICIT DRUGS AND THE AMERICAS: TIME
FOR CHANGE

by **JUAN GABRIEL TOKATLIAN**

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After more than four decades of an enduring public policy on illicit psychoactive substances, at the beginning of a new century, and in the midst of an electoral year, the US narcotics question is (r)emerging as a pressing national concern for the public opinion. Briefly stated, the Reagan-Bush-Clinton "drug war" has not worked and US citizens are feeling and understanding that drug abuse is once more a major individual and social question. While recent surveys show that a large majority of the people see the drug problem as getting worse, most politicians, bureaucrats, and decision-makers shy away from too much discussion on this issue. This is a big mistake. Problems do not vanish because they are not debated. The politics of denial ends up justifying a continuous crusade on drugs without accountability.

Nearly U.S.\$ 400 billion in federal funds and state and local resources were devoted to different anti-drug activities during the last 20 years with limited results as far as reducing significantly the demand for narcotics in the United States. Although it has not peaked as during the early to mid-1980s, the consumption of a variety of natural and synthetic illegal drugs is still very high by 2000 according both to independent studies and to official reports on this topic: the United States has today 13.6 million consumers of illicit drugs. The crack epidemic of the 1980s is not over yet while heroin consumption grew through the 1990s. The abuse of amphetamines is acute. LSD is back in fashion and speedball (a combination of

cocaine and heroin) is in vogue in several US metropolises. Cocaine, obviously, is still eagerly demanded by heavy users.

After spending so many billions of dollars to control the drug phenomenon, what went wrong? In essence, the national and international drug control strategy by the United States over the last three administrations was flawed. Neither Reagan-Bush's rhetorically "tough" nor Clinton's silently "soft" prohibitionism has produced any noticeable improvements for the United States. If abstinence is the critical target of prohibition, the figures in terms of new use and more abuse of drugs and the data on drug-related criminality and family sufferings demonstrate that this goal is groundless and costly.

The cornerstone of US drug control strategy was manifold and intertwined: to reduce the price at the stage of production and to improve eradication in order to discourage peasants to cultivate illicit crops; to strengthen interdiction at the processing and transit countries with the purpose of decreasing the availability and potency of drugs in the United States; and to enhance seizures at US borders so as to elevate the domestic price of narcotics and thus, to deter the entrance of additional potential consumers into the drug market. Notwithstanding the efforts and the unprecedented level of federal (more than 50%) and state (more than 30%) inmates sentenced for drug offenses, the truth is that this policy is close to collapse. Nowadays in the United States most illegal drugs are more easily available with greater purity and at a lower price than in the early 1980s.

The heavily-ideological and highly-repressive supply-oriented policies on drugs designed and implemented by Republicans and Democrats alike, have been a fiasco both at home and abroad. The definition of drugs as an overwhelming

national (in)security threat and the rising involvement of the military in ill-defined law enforcement tasks inside and outside the United States was unnecessary and inappropriate. The notion that the domestic narcotics problem is the creation of some sort 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 simplistic.

As a consequence of this failed anti-drug strategy, there were few winners and many losers. Inversely to what was expected and desired and as unintended effect of the Republican-Democrat tactics on drugs, American organized crime at home and transnational criminal organizations abroad in Latin American and the Caribbean, Southern and Central Europe, South-East and South-West Asia and the former Soviet Union in particular, got richer and more powerful, while US citizens became less safe and too victimized. Imposing harsher legal enforcement constraints upon pleasures, vices and desires exacerbates violence and corruption as has historically been proven with other forbidden preferences and commodities.

Paradoxically, perhaps the only way that illicit drugs could be eliminated altogether would be by suppressing democracy and curtailing capitalism. In order to get rid of narcotics, one would have to set up so many limitations and restrictions on society to achieve that goal that it would threaten to destroy democratic politics and to weaken capitalist economics.

The trouble with drugs then is neither foreign nor military. The narcotics problematic is a demand issue with social and national implications and global ramifications and linkages. Thus, the solution does not need to be necessarily domestic legalization or external intervention. To be loyal to the metaphor so

preferred by US politicians, policy-makers should follow the advise of Karl von Clausewitz: regarding illicit drugs, it is basic to discern the "enemy's center of gravity", the pivotal place "on which everything depends" and "that is the point against which all our energies should be directed". That site is the United States. And rather than a new drug crusade or a protracted debate for and against prohibition, the alternative could be a harm-reduction policy at the individual and social levels, both in terms of health and law, domestically as well as internationally. The key idea is to limit and minimize the negative effects of drug use instead of trying to attain the unrealistic chimera of abstentionism.

In that context, real changes are fundamental. Better-funded demand-oriented, pain-mitigation, community-based programs, with a serious, greater and prolonged emphasis on prevention, treatment, education and rehabilitation, are urgently needed. Instead of spending enormous amounts of resources for internal and external interdiction, source-country short-term control projects and domestic criminal enforcement, the United States must invest more on their own heavy users, particularly those on crack, cocaine and heroin and on decreasing the transmission of AIDS among and from drug consumers.

At the international level, Washington could diminish bilateral aid to countries and increment its contribution to multilateral organizations involved in drug reduction activities. The United States provides every year several hundred million dollars in assistance to developing nations to contain drug cultivation, processing and trafficking, while it dedicates less than 0.05% of its anti-drug resources to multinational efforts to mitigate the drug phenomenon both in terms of demand and supply. If as Washington often repeats, illegal drugs are a

transnational phenomenon, then well-concerted and economically-supported global initiatives should be seriously encouraged.

Third World societies affected by illicit drugs need legal trade and positive political, cultural and financial relations with the United States and its citizenry. US taxpayers are mostly tired with external anti-drug, military-oriented aid to individual countries and would rather prefer to see their monies used more efficiently through credible international institutions. Blaming Belize or Mexico for the high consumption of marijuana in the United States, bashing in Myanmar or Pakistan for the domestic rise of heroin addiction or identifying Bolivia or Colombia as scapegoats for the growth of cocaine abuse will not solve either US problem with drugs nor the world-wide difficulties derived from a quite profitable illegal narcotics enterprise.

During the Cold War and on every strategic issue--be it diplomatic, economic or military--that linked both internal and foreign politics, the United States insisted that no multinational design was a substitute for US policy. Maybe American decision-makers were right back then. However, it is misleading to assume that such a stance is consistent, feasible or pragmatic now. Drugs are the paradigmatic example of what former President of the Council of Foreign Relations, Bayless Manning, called in the mid-70s an "intermestic" issue; an issue that "is simultaneously, profoundly, and inseparably both domestic and international".

In dealing imaginatively and effectively with drugs, Washington should broaden its options instead of concentrating on a single, blind, and punitive alternative. In addition, it is essential for the United States to avoid an approach to

the drug dilemma from the perspective of thinking in terms of closed autonomy, unrestricted sovereignty, and complete autarky. Thus, a combination of a more humane domestic policy on drug demand based on harm reduction and an enlightened world policy on narcotics supported by an assertive multilateralism, can probably help to alleviate and even gradually resolve the renewed and profound crisis generated by illicit psychoactive substances.

In terms of a concrete example of narcodiplomacy--the case of US-Latin American narcopolitics--there is the need for an urgent new thinking. Drugs just won't go away in the short term, either in the United States or in Latin America.

Relations between Washington and many Latin American capitals have suffered a process of increased deterioration during the recent years. In North, Central and South America the drug phenomenon had created enormous social, political, ecological and military difficulties. Human rights abuses, environmental catastrophes, unbalanced civil-military relations, institutional corruption, massive civil rights violations, concentration of power in drug Mafias, law enforcement failures, are some of the signs left by a mistaken "war on drugs" concentrated at the supply side of the narcotics question.

New budget increases and larger antinarcotics bureaucracies in both the United States and Latin America, has not produced any noticeable improvements. Soaring drug-related violence in many urban centers in the whole hemisphere, from Canada to Argentina are apparent. In this context, it is easy not to assume responsibility for a failed public policy in the Americas.

A mixture of US moral imperialism on the drug issue and Latin American narco-nationalism could be fatal for the interamerican system. A mature, inventive and preventive strategy between the United States and Latin America on the narcotics front will definitely establish a reasonable framework to seriously evaluate both in the short and long terms, the actual reduction of drug demand as well as the effective control of supply.

The effect of the drug phenomenon in Latin America and the Caribbean has been critical, even devastating. In the early 80 only Bolivia and Peru were major producers of coca and Colombia was the main processing site of coca paste into cocaine. Today, at the outset of a new millenium every Andean country plus Brazil is a producer of coca leaves of different quality and in multiple quantity. The evolution of coca cultivation towards the Amazon has meant that more than 1,000,000 hectares of the Amazon basin shared by five countries have been destroyed through the deforestation carried out for the production of coca, through the downgrading of the soils by means of the chemical precursors used to transform coca into cocaine and thorough the chemical fumigation of coca crops done by the government authorities.

In terms of human rights violations, the two most dramatic cases are Peru and Colombia, where approximately more than one third and more than two thirds respectively of the abuses and killings are drug-related; that is produced by drug traffickers, or by traffickers associated with terrorist groups, or by right-wing paramilitary forces nurtured by local drug lords. The growing military assistance provided by the United States to most coca-producing and trafficking nations fuels this dramatic level of violence.

In the Andean region, in general, the civil-military balance has moved in favor of the military in the last two decades because of their increasing involvement in counter-narcotics tasks that, in reality, belong to the field of activities of the police and the law enforcement community. This shift in the balance in the institutional framework of security matters and in terms of the control of public order have contributed to consolidate non liberal democracies in the region. These non liberal democracies are so because they held elections but there is no real rule of law operating nor clear division of powers, nor a truly respect for basic civil rights.

In Mexico, Colombia, Bolivia and several Caribbean islands the degree of narco-corruption has reached the upper echelons of government, creating the fear that narco-states could be established in the near future if the drug phenomenon is not coped with new, bold proposals and policies. High government officials, from Prime Ministers and Presidents to cabinet members, Congressmen and security forces have been directly bought or influenced by drug monies.

The Caribbean and Latin America witness the emergence of financial paradises that are creating enormous negative medium and long term effects on the economies. Less productive investment is arriving, lack of control systems are common and drug-related finance is entering into the political contest. Thus, unprecedented economic, social and political problems are looming into the horizon from Uruguay to Turks and Caicos, from Guatemala to Paraguay.

In all Latin America and the Caribbean alike the collapse of the judicial system through the use of force, the threat of force, the bribing and corrupting developed by highly skillful Mafias is the prevalent note. Drug syndicates, now more globalized than ever, operating in North, Central and South American have put the law enforcement capabilities of most countries on the brink.

The Americas, as a whole, need to forge a new thinking and a new consensus on illicit drugs. That task cannot be solely the result of a governmental policy or a state initiative. There is a need for a “citizen diplomacy”—people to people—around the hemisphere that may bring a diversity of proposals to the social and political debate on drugs. More of the same will be insane. A broad coalition in favor of novel ideas will enlighten the ongoing poor debate on narcotics. At least that may be an interesting starting point to overcome drug prohibition and its negative impact in the hemisphere.

JUAN GABRIEL TOKATLIAN holds a Ph.D. in International Relations from The Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies(1991). He is currently Professor at Universidad de San Andrés in Argentina (since 1999). He has been Associate Professor at the Institute for Political Studies and International Relations of the Universidad Nacional de Colombia (1994-1998) and Director of the Center for International Studies of the Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá, Colombia (1987-1994).