

Introduction

For half a century, starting with the challenge of fascism, America's national security establishment has enjoyed the most important guarantee of its influence, prestige, and claim on the national treasury: a credible international threat. When Germany, Japan, and Italy became America's allies, international communism took their place as an enemy for almost four decades. Yet that menace too has faded with the opening to China, détente, and now the revolutionary political changes in Eastern Europe. And even state-sponsored terrorism, once nominated by the Reagan administration as a successor threat, today arouses little sustained indignation.

In the 1990s, the national security community has finally found a new threat: narcoterrorism. The nation's enemy number one today is drug abuse. Before the crisis with Iraq, nearly two-thirds of the American people viewed it as "the most important problem facing this country."¹ More Americans ranked drugs an "extremely serious threat" to national security than they did any other issue—including terrorism, the Persian Gulf or Middle East conflicts, and the spread of communism in Central America.² Now that Mikhail Gorbachev has put a benign face on America's traditional foe, the United States is beginning to turn the weight of its power against this new evil, represented above all by Colombia's cocaine cartels and their corrupt allies, like former Panama dictator Manuel Noriega.

Drugs have played a role in American foreign policy since the early part of the twentieth century. During the Cold War, American leaders played the theme of the "Red dope menace" in their propaganda against communist China, Castro's Cuba, and, most recently, Nicaragua under the Sandinistas. During the past two decades, drug issues have also

strained U.S. relations with such noncommunist regimes as France, Turkey, Mexico, and the Bahamas.

Today, however, the national panic over crack has turned foreign drug enforcement into a new American crusade. The popular frustration with America's failure to stop the drug trade at home, despite government expenditures of more than \$10 billion a year, has prompted national leaders to demand a dramatic escalation of enforcement abroad, up to and including military intervention against foreign drug lords and peasant cultivators. The "War on Drugs" is fast turning from an overworked metaphor into a dangerous reality.

As early as 1982, Vice President Bush and his aides began pushing to involve the CIA and U.S. armed forces in the drug interdiction effort.³ In 1986, President Reagan signed a directive acknowledging drugs as a national security threat. In the summer of 1989, only a few months after taking office as president, Bush built on that precedent with a secret National Security Decision Directive (NSDD) expanding the role of U.S. military forces in fighting the drug trade in Latin America. In addition to increased financial aid, equipment, and training for the military and police of the Andean countries, Bush authorized wide-ranging missions by U.S. military special operations forces in the drug-producing regions.⁴

Defense Secretary Richard Cheney, branding drugs a "direct threat to the sovereignty and security of our country," ordered commanders to develop specific plans for "operational support" of antidrug missions in Latin America and vowed to ensure a "more aggressive and robust" U.S. military presence in the Andes.⁵ And with the invasion of Panama in December 1989, justified in part as an effort to capture an indicted drug suspect (General Noriega), the Bush administration dramatically demonstrated the terms on which it is willing to fight the new drug war.

A few years ago, such a policy would have stirred dire warnings from politicians, the press, and the public of the danger of another Vietnam-style entanglement.⁶ Indeed, the prospects of victory are no better in the Andes, where unforgiving terrain, hostile peasants, and well-financed traffickers make a deadly mix. But memories today are short and passions are high. Distinguished members of Congress have pushed successfully to overcome the Pentagon's reluctance to step into another quagmire. The liberal Rep. Stephen Solarz, a New York Democrat, says drugs are like missiles "fired at American cities," thus warranting a military plan to "knock out the enemy." Sen. William Cohen, a liberal Maine Republican and key critic of the Reagan administration's Iran-Contra policy, says the only solution is to "go to the source" by "taking out the machine-gun nest."⁷

Even Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts, whose investigation of the Reagan administration's connivance at drug trafficking informs the core of this book, joined that chorus for a time. In early 1989 he declared, "We should engage in joint military and paramilitary operations, with Congressional approval, including helicopter and air strikes on cocaine fields with processing centers."⁸ Defining the narcotics problem as "a national security and foreign policy issue of significant proportions," his narcotics subcommittee recommended in its final report on the Contras and drugs that the government "consider how to utilize more effectively the . . . military options to neutralize the growing power of the cartels."⁹ (By 1990, Kerry had changed his tune, calling for a skeptical reexamination of those military options "before body bags come back to this country.")¹⁰

Faced with such pressure and the erosion of its traditional missions, the U.S. military, gun-shy after disastrous interventions in Vietnam and Lebanon, has reversed its initial opposition to joining the drug war. Defense Secretaries Caspar Weinberger and Frank Carlucci argued vigorously against diverting forces and giving troops law-enforcement tasks for which they were never trained. But "with peace breaking out all over," one two-star general told a reporter, "it might give us something to do." Lawrence Korb, former assistant secretary of defense under Reagan, observed, "Getting help from the military on drugs used to be like pulling teeth. Now everybody's looking around to say, 'Hey, how can we justify these forces?' And the answer they're coming up with is drugs."¹¹

Along with drawing the military into the war on drugs, President Bush has beefed up the CIA's covert operations capabilities, despite the discredit cast upon clandestine presidential powers by the Iran-Contra investigation. A newly created CIA Counter Narcotics Center will serve as a clearinghouse for drug intelligence and, according to the *Washington Post*, as "the springboard for a wide range of covert operations to attempt to destabilize and disrupt Colombian drug cartels that control the Latin cocaine trade."¹² Its exact mission is detailed in classified presidential directives, but discussions at the level of the National Security Council have included talk of "covert paramilitary operations that could involve assassinations of Colombian cartel leaders," despite a 1976 executive order barring assassinations.¹³

This development illustrates the unique power of the drug issue to quell debate over covert operations that may cross traditional moral and political lines. As if the Iran-Contra affair had never happened, members of Congress appear ready to accept a major expansion of secret presidential power in the name of fighting crack. Even Jack Blum, the able former

chief counsel for Kerry's subcommittee and a sharp critic of government wrong-doing, has supported unleashing the CIA. "It would be perfectly appropriate to run significant covert operations against [the major traffickers]," he said. "We have a clear national security interest."¹⁴

Yet Blum's own investigation uncovered proof of CIA involvement with Central American drug traffickers ranging from Contra commanders to Panama's Noriega. Indeed, the long and sordid history of CIA involvement with the Sicilian Mafia, the French Corsican underworld, the heroin producers of Southeast Asia's Golden Triangle, the marijuana- and cocaine-trafficking Cuban exiles of Miami, and the opium smuggling *mujaheddin* of Afghanistan simply reinforces the lesson of the Contra period: far from considering drug networks their enemy, U.S. intelligence organizations have made them an essential ally in the covert expansion of American influence abroad.

The most dramatic increases in drug smuggling since World War II have occurred in the context of, and indeed partly because of, covert operations in the same regions. CIA involvement in Southeast Asia contributed to the U.S. heroin epidemic of the late 1960s, just as CIA involvement in Central America contributed to the cocaine epidemic of the 1980s. Although the CIA did not actually peddle drugs, it did form gray alliances with right-wing gangs deemed helpful against a common enemy.¹⁵

These alliances in Thailand and Indochina were carefully documented, in part from ex-CIA sources, by Alfred McCoy in his 1972 book, *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia*.¹⁶ McCoy showed how opium production by CIA-backed warlords increased tenfold in a short period after the CIA moved in and how heroin distribution to the West was facilitated by the Sicilian and Corsican Mafias' intelligence connections in Palermo and Marseilles.

Ralph Blumenthal, a *New York Times* reporter, made the same point in a recent book on the infamous "Pizza Connection" heroin ring. Summarizing the research of a former CIA and DEA agent, he wrote:

American authorities were instrumental in the revival of the Sicilian mafia [although] they persuaded the Italian government to mount a successful crackdown on the heroin smugglers [into the United States]. This left the Corsicans, who had also been buttressed by the CIA as an anti-Communist force, as the major providers of illicit heroin to the United States. The Corsicans had two powerful advantages: their connections to the Southeast heroin market through the French colonial presence in Indochina and their influence on the French secret services through the Corsicans' involvement in official anti-Communist agitation.¹⁷

It would be foolish to assume that these connections are a matter of past history, even if the CIA has severed its Mafia links. Blumenthal demonstrates that the Pizza Connection was the “successor to the French Connection, the postwar heroin pipeline from Marseilles that at its peak in 1971 was pouring an estimated ten tons of heroin a year into the United States.”¹⁸

Unlike the French Connection, however, this Sicilian ring got much of its heroin from Afghanistan, the single largest exporter of opium in the world by the mid-1980s and the source of half the heroin consumed in the United States.¹⁹ The chief smugglers of Afghan opium were (and as of this writing still are) CIA-backed, anti-Soviet guerrillas working together with Pakistan’s military intelligence service. “You can say the rebels make their money off the sale of opium,” David Melocik, DEA congressional affairs liaison, admitted in 1983. “There’s no doubt about it. The rebels keep their cause going through the sale of opium.”²⁰

In Afghanistan, as in Indochina, and, as we shall see, in Central America, the White House and CIA chose to look the other way while their allies sold vast quantities of drugs to the U.S. market. “The Reagan administration has done little to press the guerrillas to curb the drug trade, according to senior State Department and intelligence analysts,” the *New York Times* reported in 1988. “‘We’re not going to let a little thing like drugs get in the way of the political situation,’ said an administration official who follows Afghanistan closely, emphasizing that narcotics are relatively a minor issue in the context of policy toward the Afghan guerrillas. ‘And when the Soviets leave and there’s no money in the country, it’s not going to be a priority to disrupt the drug trade.’”²¹

As our study aims to show, the Afghanistan story has repeated itself in Central America. This pattern is deeply embedded in the CIA’s history and structure. For the CIA to target international drug networks, it would have to dismantle prime sources of intelligence, political leverage, and indirect financing for its Third World operations. If this book shows nothing else, it should indicate the folly of expecting such a total change of institutional direction.

Failure to heed this history could carry significant consequences. Any reliance on covert tactics to fight the drug war overseas opens the door to serious political abuses at home. One risk is that congressional oversight will break down, as it has so often in the past. In real battles, commanders can’t (and won’t) wait for armchair warriors in the House and Senate intelligence committees to approve every order. Rather than protest their loss of oversight, most members of Congress will defer to the executive branch on the operational conduct of this war. The perceived need for

decisive action will tilt the balance of political power toward the president and away from Congress, just as it did at the height of the Cold War.

As Dr. Jaime Malamud Goti, former chair of the Presidential Commission on Drug Control in Argentina, observed, "The claim that national security is endangered by a vaguely defined threat to Western cultures opens the way to justifications for granting extraordinary powers to military and police forces. The portrayal of the drug problem as one of survival of Western society removes policy makers from normal legal restraints. It also justifies the argument that the problem is too urgent to submit it to domestic and international debates."²²

His warning deserves all the more notice given the failure of Congress to tighten up presidential reporting requirements for covert operations after the exposure of the Iran-Contra scandal. During the congressional investigation, Stanley Sporkin, then the CIA's general counsel, advanced the argument that presidents could issue secret "findings" to authorize covert operations that would "override" existing laws. Sporkin claimed that as "both a statutory matter as well as a constitutional matter" presidents could decide not to notify Congress of these findings and could, in effect, unilaterally repeal the laws of the land.²³ Today Sporkin is a federal judge, and Congress has accepted his (and Bush's) contention that presidents may launch covert operations without first notifying Congress.

Would-be abusers of power may also be emboldened by the failure of the media to fully investigate the connection between the drug trade and the Reagan administration's secret deals with Iran and the Contras. Invoking the cause of drug enforcement has freed the administration from scrutiny by much of the media as well as by Congress. The scarcity of serious media dissent on waging the War on Drugs through military operations, CIA intrigues, and attacks on civil liberties confirms to presidents and their agents that foreign intervention in the name of fighting drugs will open them to few political risks.

Full exposure of the cocaine connection to the Iran-Contra case is thus vital if the nation is to avoid misuse of the drug issue for dangerous political ends. Yet full exposure is exactly what Americans have never been given. Several reporters did outstanding investigative work, but their findings were either ignored or scantily treated by major media organs like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. The Iran-Contra investigating committees ducked the issue and included in their final report a mendacious memo purporting to refute the essence of the Contra-drug allegations. Only in April 1989, after intense political wrangling and crippling delays, did the Senate Subcommittee on Terrorism, Narcotics, and International Operations (the Kerry subcommittee) finally produce

its own report documenting the Contra-drug connection—long after both the public and the media had lost interest in the Iran-Contra affair. With its report unread and its implications ignored, the Kerry subcommittee's efforts went largely for nought.

This book is a modest effort to set forth the facts of the Central American drug connection and to fill in the significant gaps left by the Kerry report's valuable but incomplete account. Our approach is more analytical than investigative. Interviews with current or former government officials, journalists, drug traffickers, and mercenaries inform this book, but most references are to recognized and widely accepted public sources: sworn testimony taken by committees of Congress; voluminous FBI, Customs, and other investigative records, many of them appended to the Kerry report; domestic and foreign news accounts from respected media; and official reports from abroad, such as legislative commission findings from Costa Rica.

Even the most reputable sources cannot guarantee accuracy in an area as murky as the narcotics traffic. Rather than recount some controversial stories, we have steered away from witnesses whose credibility has come into serious question. A scandal like Iran-Contra inevitably produces a large number of opportunistic superwitnesses, fantasizers, and conspiracy peddlers—not to mention conscious agents of disinformation.²⁴ If, despite our best efforts, history proves a few of our assertions wrong, it will hardly overthrow the larger conclusions of this study.

The first half of this work analyzes available evidence on the way corrupt military elites, Contra leaders, the CIA, and Washington policy-makers opened the door to the cocaine trade through Central America. The second half explores how administration intimidation of witnesses, congressional cowardice, and media caution allowed this alliance to persist so durably and with so little public challenge during years of great national consensus on the need to fight drugs. Jonathan Marshall is primarily responsible for the introduction, Chapters 1–4, and 10 and 12; Peter Dale Scott for Chapters 5–9 and 11.

Through this narrow but intense focus on one front in the War on Drugs, we hope to revive the debate over solutions to the nation's long-standing drug problem—and ways to avoid phony cures that only compound it.