

Joan Smith

Easy targets Hard drugs

The USA has a history of problematic drug use back to the 19th century. Punishing users has failed so the US is now exporting castigation to producers. South America is becoming the whipping-boy of drug-ravaged USA



Joan Smith is a columnist for the *Independent on Sunday*, novelist and critic. Her book *Moralities: Sex, Money & Power in the 21st Century*, will be published by Allen Lane in May

Here is a little-reported incident from the front line of America's drugs war: towards the end of October last year, more than 50 soldiers and police officers died in heavy fighting, including 22 troops on board a Blackhawk helicopter gunship. The American-made helicopter crashed after coming under fire, although official sources say its tail rotor grazed a hill in difficult terrain.

This episode should have made headlines round the world, as did the shooting down of two American helicopters in Mogadishu, Somalia, in 1993. But in Mogadishu, the casualties – 18 dead, 75 wounded – were American.

Those who died in October were Colombian, grim statistics from a war that is increasingly being fought with American money and military hardware, but without (so far) American casualties.

In the US, 'war on drugs' is a metaphor. When people talk about fighting the drugs menace, they do not mean with semi-automatic

weapons and helicopter gunships. But one of the last major acts of the outgoing Clinton administration was to export America's drugs war to a Latin American country that has already suffered 35 years of civil conflict.

Last summer President Clinton visited Colombia, but he stayed well away from the capital, Bogota, and areas held by the two main rebel groups in the south of the country. His purpose was morale building. He announced that the American government was to go ahead with \$1.3 billion of mostly military aid to assist President Andres Pastrana in his dual aims of seizing back rebel-held territory and eradicating coca and opium fields.

The method urged on the Colombians by the Americans is aerial defoliation using the fusarium oxysporum fungus, which can stay in the soil for decades and could damage other edible crops. According to some of the scheme's many opponents, it can also kill people with damaged immune systems.

Down payments

The Colombians have neither the expertise nor the hardware to carry out Plan Colombia, as it is grandly called, on their own. But the American drugs czar, General Barry McCaffrey, enthusiastically backed the plan and Clinton, who appointed McCaffrey despite his controversial Gulf War record, pushed the aid package through Congress in June.

Most of the money will go on 60 Blackhawk and Huey2 helicopters, along with training for Colombian pilots by American military advisors; the Americans are even planning to send one of their own generals to run the show. This may sound familiar to those who know the history of the Vietnam War.

It is in effect an extremely one-sided intervention in Colombia's civil war, given that there is no meaningful distinction between the coca traffickers and the rebels, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN).

Clinton even managed to persuade his EU allies, including Britain, to offer financial support to this scheme, which has been denounced by opponents from drug reformers and human rights activists to Republicans worried by an apparently open-ended commitment to a war that the Colombian government is by no means certain to win.

A Republican Senator, Slade Gorton, succinctly expressed conservative reservations about the scheme: 'It isn't a down payment we make on a home or automobile. It is a down payment on which we don't know the schedule of future payment. We don't know the total amount of future payments. We don't know how we will measure success if, indeed, any success exists'.

Human rights activists pointed out that the military aid was going to an army accused of massive human rights abuses. The American government's own lawyers have suggested that the indiscriminate use of fusarium oxysporum may violate international conventions prohibiting the use of biological weapons.

In Britain, a Liberal Democrat MP,



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Jenny Tonge, returned from Latin America last year and denounced the military aid package as a scheme 'to hammer the people of Colombia and to displace thousands more, a people whose only sin is to grow a crop which has a high price in the West'.

She had been speaking to some of the Colombians already displaced by 35 years of civil war, many of them – estimates are as high as 1.5 million – living in tents made of polythene sheets and surviving on food aid from foreign charities.

Other Latin American countries are far from relaxed about the intervention. Brazil responded by despatching 25,000 troops to the Colombian border, terrified that the conflict might spill over into its territory. It also fears that the cartels, which control the drugs trade in Colombia, will encourage indigenous Brazilian tribes to begin growing coca and opium – displacement is a well-known effect of attempts to stamp out drug cultivation.

Exporting war

With opposition coming from so many (and such diverse) quarters, the question is why Clinton decided to escalate his domestic war on drugs into another country, at huge expense and with no guarantee of success? What prompted him, in the home strait of his troubled Presidency, to press for this huge military aid package to a country few Americans care about, except as the butt of knowing jokes about 'nose candy'?

The first point that needs to be made is that drugs loom large in the imaginations of ordinary Americans, especially in conservative states where alcohol is regarded with suspicion and drug use is very nearly diabolic.

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They live in terror of drug dealers corrupting their children, and entertain lurid ideas of inner city ghettos where teenage prostitutes sell their bodies to pay for crack cocaine. Some of these fears are justified, but they only tell half the story.

Middle America seems hardly aware, for example, that white drug users outnumber blacks by five to one, and that many of these

consumers are affluent, middle-class professionals who hold down well-paid jobs and live in classy apartments. Yet, in spite of the occasional scandal about cocaine use in high society, far more blacks than whites go to prison for drugs offences.

It could be argued that a persistent refusal to face these truths about demand is behind America's spectacularly unsuccessful war on drugs. As Newsweek recently concluded, 'it is demand in North America, and not production in South America, that drives the cocaine trade' – a point President Pastrana has also made.

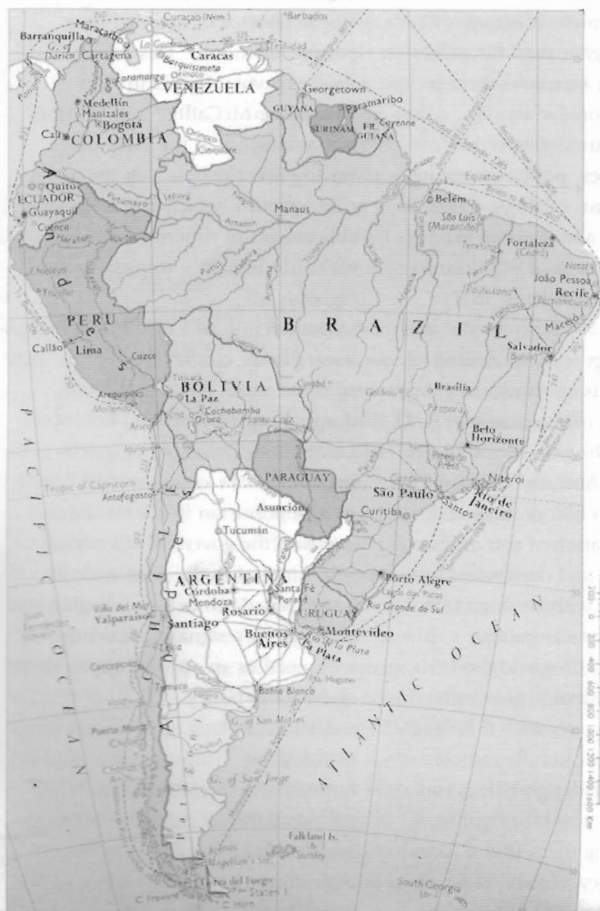
What the magazine was suggesting is that Latin American producers are whipping-boys for the section of the North American population whose drug use is habitual. Put starkly, the war on drugs allows federal government to claim it is tackling the drugs menace, without admitting the role of affluent America – especially affluent white America – in creating the problem.

Benefits of war

Of course, the drugs war has other benefits. It legitimises continuing intervention in Latin America, which the US has always regarded as its own backyard,¹ at a time when the role of previous American governments in countries like Chile and Guatemala has been heavily criticised. (Bizarrely, President Clinton pressed Plan Colombia through Congress after he had visited Guatemala and apologised for American involvement in that country's genocidal civil war, which resulted in the deaths of 200,000 people.)

The drugs war also supports the hugely influential American arms industry, which employs hundreds of thousands of people and needs orders, regardless of whether its own military is heavily committed overseas. The decision to take the drugs war into Colombia has created lucrative new markets for helicopters at a moment when it is widely known that the Republicans are unenthusiastic about the kind of operations the Clinton administration mounted in Somalia and Kosovo.

But the drugs war performs another vital function. It is a





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distraction, something to blame for the deepening problems of American society.

A recent report from the UN children's agency shows that 22.4 per cent of American children are now growing up in poverty, with predictable consequences in terms of health, education and links with crime. (For comparison, the figure in social-democratic Sweden is less than three per cent.) Many of these impoverished US children, who together form a population larger than the city of New York, are Afro-American or belong to other ethnic groups, including native Americans. The World Health Organisation has published research showing that levels of sickness in these disadvan-

taged groups are similar to those found in developing countries.

Yet 'ordinary' Americans can live much of their lives without being aware of these unpleasant truths, basking instead in the knowledge that the Clinton administration built up the largest budget surplus in years. If they think about it at all, they believe that the problem with the sprawling housing projects where the urban poor tend to live is gang warfare, fuelled by the drugs trade – criminality, for conservative US politicians, is a useful cover for the harsh reality of poverty.

It also offers the criminal justice system as a remedy for acute social problems in a country where redistribution of wealth is firmly off the agenda. The preference for locking people up, rather than

eradicating the need for them to get involved in illegal activities like drug dealing, means that two million Americans are currently in prison, 400,000 for non-violent drug offences. More people are serving sentences for drug offences in the US than the entire prison population of Europe.

Ethnic bias

The figure is still going up, partly as a result of the three-strikes-and-you're-out system of life imprisonment for people who have committed three drugs offences, a policy enthusiastically supported by McCaffrey. The US now has the highest rate of imprisonment *on the planet*, according to the Sentencing Project, a non-profit organisation based in Washington.

This is bad enough, but when you look at the statistics more closely, it also starts to look like an exercise in social control. Two-thirds of those sent to state prison for drugs offences are black, according to a recent report by Human Rights Watch. Throughout the country, black defendants are 13 times more likely to find themselves in gaol, while there are individual states where their rate of imprisonment is between 27 and 57 times higher than for whites. One in 20 black men over the age of 18 are in prison.

Whole communities have been devastated by these policies, creating precisely the nexus of single mothers, broken families and dependence on welfare that national politicians sanctimoniously condemn in their speeches.

What the drugs war has created, in other words, is an American gulag, where hundreds of thousands of black men pay the penalty for largely white drug use. And anyone who tries to point this out, or to argue for the decriminalisation of soft drugs, will be ridiculed and demonised by powerful people with an interest in keeping the drugs war going.

Last year, McCaffrey told the US government criminal justice and drug policy sub-committee that drug reformers were 'a carefully-camouflaged, well-funded, tightly-knit core of people whose goal is to legalise drug use', making them sound like a sinister conspiracy. He also claimed, as evidence of the need to resist any

liberalisation of the drugs laws, that the Netherlands has a murder rate double that of the US. 'That's drugs', he declared unequivocally, before his figures were shot down in flames – the US murder rate is four times higher than that of the Netherlands.

War of words

So back to Colombia. The death toll in October, which occurred during fierce battles between government troops and leftist guerrillas in the north-west of the country, was a reminder that the country's armed forces are poorly-trained, almost certainly a factor in their habit of carrying out revenge attacks and human rights abuses.

As well as those who died at once, the battle ended with 47 police officers missing, most of them presumed dead or taken prisoner by FARC. It is the second time government forces have lost a helicopter, although FARC is not supposed to possess anti-aircraft weapons.

The impression that all was not going well with Plan Colombia was reinforced a few days earlier, when McCaffrey suddenly announced that he intended to step down as White House director of national drug policy this month. This means that the two pivotal figures in Plan Colombia, McCaffrey and Clinton, are bowing out at the same time, leaving other people – in the worst case scenario, which has uncomfortable echoes of American involvement in Vietnam – to pick up the pieces.

The election of a new President has sown further confusion. Will the new administration press ahead with despatching advisors and helicopter gunships to Colombia or quietly scale back America's commitment? No serious politician in the US dares question the government's overall commitment to the fight against drugs, but alarm bells are ringing and McCaffrey's resignation has been welcomed as an opportunity to think again about policy.

After all, talking up a 'war on drugs' is one thing. Turning that metaphor into reality, especially if it includes the possibility of American military advisors returning home in body bags from a Latin American country, is quite another ■

1. Since 2 December 1823 when, in his annual message to Congress, President James Monroe declared North and South America to be off-limits for any further European colonial expansion – policy that came to be known as the Munro Doctrine.