

Ending an Opium War

Poppies and Afghan Recovery Can Both Bloom

By Anne Applebaum

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Once, the British Empire fought a war for the right to sell opium in China. In retrospect, history has judged that war destructive and wasteful, a shameless battle of colonizers against the colonized that in the end helped neither one.

Now, NATO is fighting a war to eradicate opium from Afghanistan. Allegedly, the goals this time around are different. According to the British [government](#), Afghanistan's illicit drug trade poses the "gravest threat to the long term security, development, and effective governance of Afghanistan," particularly since the Taliban is believed to be the biggest beneficiary of drug sales. Convinced that this time they are doing the morally right thing, Western governments are spending hundreds of millions of dollars bulldozing poppy fields, building up counternarcotics squads and financing alternative crops in Afghanistan. Chemical spraying may begin as early as this spring. But in retrospect, might history not judge this war to be every bit as destructive and wasteful as the original Opium Wars?

Of course it isn't fashionable right now to argue for any legal form of opiate cultivation. But look at the evidence. At the moment, Afghanistan's opium exports account for somewhere between one-third and two-thirds of the country's gross domestic product, depending on whose statistics you believe. The biggest producers are in the southern provinces where the Taliban is at its strongest, and no wonder: Every time a poppy field is destroyed, a poor person becomes poorer -- and more likely to support the Taliban against the Western forces who wrecked his crops. Yet little changes: The amount of land dedicated to poppy production grew last year by more than 60 percent, as The Post [reported](#) last month.

So central is the problem that Hamid Karzai, the Afghan president, has called opium a "cancer" worse than terrorism -- and crop-spraying may make things worse. Not only will it cause environmental and health damage, it will feel to the local population like a military attack, as Western planes drop poisonous chemicals from the sky.

Yet by far the most depressing aspect of the Afghan poppy crisis is that it exists at all -- because it doesn't have to. To see what I mean, look at the history of Turkey, where once upon a time the drug trade also threatened the country's political and economic stability. Just like Afghanistan, Turkey had a long tradition of poppy cultivation. Just like Afghanistan, Turkey worried that poppy eradication could "bring down the government." Just like Afghanistan, Turkey -- this was the era of "[Midnight Express](#)"-- was identified as the main source of the heroin sold in the West. Just like in Afghanistan, a ban was tried, and it failed.

As a result, in 1974 the Turks, with American and U.N. support, tried a different tactic. They began licensing poppy cultivation for the purpose of producing morphine, codeine and other legal opiates. Legal factories were built to replace the illegal ones. Farmers registered to grow poppies, and they paid taxes. You wouldn't necessarily know this from the latest White House drug strategy [report](#)-- which devotes several pages to Afghanistan but doesn't mention Turkey -- but the U.S. government still supports the Turkish program, even requiring U.S. drug companies to purchase 80 percent of what the legal [documents](#) euphemistically refer to as "narcotic raw materials" from the two traditional producers, Turkey and India.

Why not add Afghanistan to this list? The only good arguments against doing so -- as opposed to the silly, politically correct "just say no" arguments -- are technical: that the same weak or nonexistent bureaucracy will be no better at licensing poppy fields than it has been at destroying them, or that some of the raw material will still fall into the hands of the drug cartels. Yet some of these issues can be resolved, by building processing factories at the local level and working within local power structures. And even if the program succeeds

in stopping only half of the drug trade, a huge chunk of Afghanistan's economy will still emerge from the gray market; the power of the drug barons will be reduced; and, most important, Western money will have been visibly spent helping Afghan farmers survive, instead of destroying their livelihoods. The director of the [Senlis Council](#), a group that studies the drug problem in Afghanistan, told me he reckons that the best way to "ensure more Western soldiers get killed" is to expand poppy eradication.

Besides, things really could get worse. It isn't so hard to imagine, two or three years down the line, yet another emergency presidential speech, calling for a "surge" of troops to southern Afghanistan -- where impoverished villagers, having turned against the West, are joining the Taliban in droves. Before we get there, maybe it's worth letting some legal poppies bloom.

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