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The other losing war

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Preoccupation with Iraq has drawn attention from another unwinnable American war that has been far more destructive of life both at home and abroad and has caused far greater collateral damage in other countries, in addition to spreading contempt for American foreign engagements. This is the failed war on drugs.

It was Nixon who, in 1971, first declared war on drugs. As with Iraq, the strategy is flawed in its conception and execution, made worse by a refusal to change course in the face of failure.

It strongly emphasizes eradicating the source of drugs, interdiction of traffic and draconian punishment for offenders. It neglects what nearly every expert believes — and European experience has shown — to be the only successful strategy: a demand-side emphasis on preventive programs and rehabilitation of addicts.

The present administration's claims of a shift to preventive measures is belied by the budget of its drug control office, which allocates a 94 percent share to disrupting the supply, mainly through environmentally hazardous spraying in Latin America and the Caribbean that alienates local farmers.

The domestic results are tragic: an enormous increase in the incarceration of young, disproportionately minority Americans, resulting in the waste of human resources and the creation of a prison culture that converts nonviolent addicts into hardened criminals, without any impact on drug use. Within a year of release, 43.5 percent of drug offenders are rearrested.

Recent surveys indicate a steady increase in the use of illicit drugs: More than 40 percent of Americans over 12 have used them at some point. Nearly all Caribbean societies are involved with narcotrafficking and, in the case of Jamaica, large-scale production and export of marijuana. In 2001, illicit drug shipments in the region were worth more money than the top five legitimate exports combined.

The results have been devastating. Political corruption and payment in arms threatens the sovereignty and stability of many states. In 1985, the chief minister and minister of commerce of the Turks and Caicos Islands were arrested in Miami and imprisoned in America for drug offenses.

Drug addiction and violent crime are now endemic in Jamaica, Puerto Rico and even small islands like St. Kitts. The corruption of the police and other security forces has reached a crisis point in Jamaica, where an officer can earn the equivalent of half a year's salary by simply looking the other way. Last year, 1,300 people were murdered here, in a population of only 3 million — and that was an improvement on the previous year.

Dr. Peter Phillips, Jamaica's very competent minister of national security, estimates that 60 percent of the murders are drug-related. Calling cocaine trafficking and use the "taproot" of a "web of criminality," he said drugs sustain a "self-perpetuating culture of extreme violence" extending to many areas of the society.

The drug culture is highly transnational and organized, exemplified by the Jamaican "posses" that terrorized America in the 1980s with some 4,900 murders. Traffickers increasingly operate offshore, taking advantage of better arms, faster boats and more efficient tracking equipment than those available to local security forces.

Phillips is puzzled by America's inflexible emphasis on eradication and interdiction, and its refusal to provide help where it is most needed, like the rebuilding of corrupted police forces. He provided a telling example of the futility of current approaches. With Americans and Jamaicans working closely together recently, the percentage of transshipments of Colombian cocaine to the United States that went through Jamaica was reduced from 20 to 2. But this had no effect on the amount of cocaine entering America — the traffickers simply changed routes — and it increased violent crime in Jamaica. Drug dons became more murderous in turf wars, as there was less cocaine and money to go around.

America's unwillingness to recognize the socioeconomic context of the drug crisis at home and abroad, to see that being surrounded by failing states threatens its security, to provide aid where it is most effective, and to acknowledge that the root cause of this hemispheric disaster is not supply but its own citizens' insatiable demand for illicit drugs, is as incomprehensible as the quagmire in Iraq.

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