

U.S. legislation tries to end drug war by funding Colombian military

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Imagine living in a country where 56 percent of the population is in poverty. The average family makes less than \$500 each year. A civil war continues to rage between the two main political parties 40 years after it began.

Imagine living in a country known for the cruelty of its military. At 120,000 members strong, this army has one of the worst records for human rights violations in the world. You have heard the stories and live in fear that one day they will come after you, your family or someone you know. It happens all the time. In fact, more than 2,000 people have been killed in the last decade because they spoke out against the military.

Imagine living in a country where drug lords take over a large portion of the economy, making millions each year by trafficking cocaine and heroin into the United States. You, like more than 18,000 other families nationwide, are forced to grow cocoa plants on your farm so you can put food on the table. It may not be an honest way to earn money, but when 90 percent of the cocaine and more than half of the heroin consumed by the United States is produced in your country, it may be your only alternative to starvation.

This is the reality for the majority of people in Colombia.

The United States has further complicated the issue in its attempts to end its 30-year war on drugs by approving a \$1.3 billion to aid

Colombia in 2000. Eighty percent of these funds ended up in military hands rather than government officials. While some of this money was used for spraying crops with herbicides and training anti-narcotic forces, it is a known fact that Colombian rebels earn millions each year by offering "protection" to cocoa farmers and traffickers.

An increasing number of Colombia politicians are calling for an end to crop-dusting, citing it as both damaging to the environment and the local residents. Colombian president Andreas Pastrana is unlikely to give in to demands because he receives a steady flow of money from the United States. But his term is up next year, and the more liberal politicians hope to take control of government and end current anti-narcotic practices.

Does this left-wing political group, a growing force in Colombian politics, think the country needs to try new alternatives in winning the war on drugs? Or do they instead wish to capitalize on a enormously profitable business?

Honestly, why wouldn't they?

With the demand for illicit drugs remaining steady in the United States over the last decade, South American drug traffickers hold a virtual monopoly on the industry. As purity of the drugs increases, so can the price. Because both cocaine and heroin have such high addiction rates, with heroin topping 90 percent, Colombians are pretty confident their products will be in demand for many years to come. All-in-all, Colombia is sitting on top of a multi-billion dollar franchise.

In addition, cocoa production offers many impoverished Colombians a means of survival. Guerilla forces, rebels, military and even greedy politicians provide these farmers with enough money to survive and protection from anti-narcotic forces. In return, these peasant farmers, along with rebels and others, cultivated a record 336,400 acres of cocoa in 2000, according to U.S. estimates. Crop-dusting only drives farmers farther into the jungle and mountains, where they can grow larger crops in secret.

In fact, Colombia's "drug industry" has steadily increased since the United States took interest in the South American drug trade. Liberal Party member Horacio Serpa speaks frequently and openly on Colombia's drug problem. "Today, there is more cocaine being produced, more trafficking, more traffickers and larger areas under cultivation," he said.

Serpa says U.S. tactics of

targeting smaller farms doing the opposite of what politicians hope to achieve. "Cracking down on small drug farmers only makes the problem bigger," he said.

One would think that the United States, having spent 30 years dealing with a national drug pandemic, would know how to handle the problem. Instead, the government only makes the problem worse with each new law passed. Toughening legislation has not worked; neither has confiscating larger numbers of drugs each year. Longer prison sentences are not the answer; first time drug offenders should be placed in rehabilitation centers, yet the government refuses to support this. Outside forces counter this by trying to get larger quantities through the border; internal forces simply produce the drugs themselves. Students with a year of chemistry and access to the right chemicals will attempt to make ecstasy or methamphetamine themselves if they can no longer purchase it on the streets.

Government officials, legislators and anti-drug activists must realize the grim reality of the drug world. Just as capitalism quickly took over American society, leading first to enormous wealth and success, then consolidation of power and wealth, so has the drug industry. Never before has a product ever had such high demand. Look at how opium brought China to its knees and addicted millions of Americans in the nineteenth century. The drugs

may have changed, but times have not. If there is a demand, greedy people will always be willing to take risks.

The most ironic component of America's war on drugs is that everyone but the American government realizes it is a futile battle. "The United States' current war on drugs is just not winnable," researcher Kathy Knight said during a presentation on America's war on drugs in Colombia. "As long as there's demand, you're going to have drugs."

Colombians seem to be realizing that current approaches will not solve the problem. In 1994, a law passed legalizing possession of small quantities of drugs. Further drug legalization, especially that of cocaine and heroin production, has been a hot topic in recent national debates.

Will the United States ever realize 30 years and billions of dollars have only increased users and opened them up to more drugs? Or will this war simply rage on for 30 more years, until users become the majority? What will it take to awaken organizations like the D.E.A. that they are not, and never have been, on the winning side of this battle?

Perhaps Sen. Vivanie Morales put the drug war into perspective best. "A few years from now, we will look back on the drug war as one of the stupidest wars that humanity has ever waged," he said.

Colombia may realize this soon, but when will the United States?

THE PENDULUM

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Editorial

Opinions expressed offer lesson in First Amendment

In the last week, we have seen the First Amendment in action. A staff member wrote an article on religion that turned out to be quite controversial. The article received feedback from students and faculty, a few of whom wrote back to us. (These letters are printed on pages 3 and 4.)

One student wrote, "If Elon truly is about acceptance and tolerance, then an article like that should have never been printed." Yes, at Elon and The

Pendulum we value acceptance and tolerance. That is exactly why we stand by our decision to publish the article. Because the article went against the grain of social and political correctness does not mean it is valueless or unimportant.

Not all of our staff members agreed with the article's points. That is why we run a disclaimer each week stating, "The views and ideas expressed in Opinions are not necessarily those of The

Pendulum, its staff or Elon University."

We do not promise that one will find Elon ideology packaged with a nice bow on top when they open a new issue each week. The stuff that makes a good Opinions section can be hard to swallow, but that doesn't make it wrong.

Religion is an emotional topic, but we must be concerned about the implications of free speech. Just as the First Amendment allows our writer to speak his opinion through the pages of our newspaper, it also allows him to hold whatever religious beliefs he chooses.