Is the US winning the 'War on Drugs' in Latin America?

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MIRANDA MURPHY, DEC 9 2011

The general consensus in the literature and the media is that the US is losing the 'war on drugs'[1][2]. Rates of consumption in the US have remained roughly the same over the last ten years and the drug trade remains a multi-billion dollar industry run by a complex international network. My analysis of the war on drugs is three-fold: firstly I present a brief history of the war on drugs until the end of the Cold War. Secondly, in the main part of this essay I look at the post-Cold War strategies used by the US to combat the supply of drugs from Latin America. Lastly I discuss American efforts to reduce demand at home and recent attempts by Southern countries to take control of the drug war. Throughout the essay I demonstrate how the war on drugs is economically, politically and socially damaging to Latin American countries. I show that the continued war on drugs has enabled the US to repress those who threaten its corporate and strategic interests in Latin America. I illustrate that through failing to sufficiently combat both supply and demand over the last forty years, the 'war' has failed to produce any positive results regarding supply or consumption. I therefore conclude that the US has lost the 'war on drugs'.

Drug smuggling from Latin America to the United States has existed since colonial times, in particular from Mexico and Colombia[3]. However, it was not until the early twentieth century that gradual prohibition was introduced and the widespread use of narcotics only came about in the 1960s. Even then, drug use did not become a serious concern of the US government until the mid-1970s, due to changes in the cultural response to drug use and the rise in consumption[4]. It was around this time that the term 'war on drugs', coined by Nixon in 1971[5], became part of the moral rhetoric around American focus on the influx of narcotics coming into the US from Latin America. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s the US had encouraged cooperation from the Southern countries. In 1972 Mexico declared a "permanent campaign" against drugs, however significant cutbacks in marijuana production failed to impact levels of US consumption as other sources expanded[6]. This was an early sign of a common problem faced by the war on drugs.

By the mid-1970s it had become apparent that Colombia was the "single most important staging point for cocaine delivery to the US[7]." Indeed, Colombia would increasingly become the focus of the war on drugs in the coming decades. US financial assistance to Colombia began in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Despite cooperation from the Colombian government, it had largely lost control of its national territory to the drug cartels that sprang up in the early 1980s. These cartels were hugely wealthy; the Medellín cartel offered to pay off Colombia's national debt in 1984 – between $11billion and $14billion – but the government refused the offer[8]. Many observers of the drug war in the 1980s attributed the power of the traffickers to the vast financial advantage they had over the comparatively meagre amount appropriated by the US[9][10][11].

This financial strength may explain why despite the commitment from Reagan's administration, a new wave of smuggling emerged in the 1980s[12]. Bagley claimed that Reagan's war on drugs suffered from lack of resources and in practice only achieved worsened relations between the US and Latin American countries[13]. For example, the US became frustrated by the inability of Mexican and Colombian officials to prosecute even brazen drug traffickers[14]. Equally, Latin American leaders felt neglected; Colombian President Virgilio Barco accused the US of "not [being] serious" about the drug problem[15]. By the end of the Cold War, many other Latin American countries were engaged with the US in the war on drugs, particularly Bolivia, Cuba, Nicaragua and Peru. However, the

strategies taken by both sides had failed to stem the rapidly growing drug trade. The US lost an estimated $110billion annually during the 1980s in drug sales[16], while the Medellín cartel, running seventy-five percent of the cocaine market, had final sales estimated at around $70billion[17]. Southern countries found their sovereignty threatened due to inadequate law enforcement, corrupt institutions and guerrilla 'protection' of traffickers[18]. States such as Colombia suffered from the terrible violence waged by the cartels and thousands of innocent people were brutally murdered under the regimes. The 'war on drugs' was failing before it had even begun.

A key characteristic of the war on drugs is that it has primarily focused on reducing the *supply* of drugs from Latin America. This has taken the form of financial aid[19], treaties[20] and the training and equipping of personnel in order to protect "a range of US security, political and economic interests[21]." NSS 1991 stated: "the international trade in drugs is a major threat to our national security" and outlined the US strategy to tackling the problem[22]. Southern countries, keen not to anger Washington, stepped up their own campaigns against drugs in the 1990s, leading to toughened narcotics law enforcement and increases in arrests and seizures[23]. Training for counter-drug operations at the School of the Americas, a US education facility for Latin American military, police and civilian personnel, which had begun in the 1960s, intensified following the end of the Cold War[24] and still features heavily at WHINSEC[25]. Concerns about the involvement of terrorist groups in drug trafficking also lead to a large overlap in the US's wars on drugs and terror in the region. For example, the targeting of Peruvian terrorist group 'The Shining Path', who have 'undisputed' involvement in drug trafficking[26]. In addition to this, the US Assistant Secretary of State explicitly linked political violence to 'narco-terrorism' in Colombia[27]. In this way, the US justified the huge amounts of financial aid provided to these countries each year (for example, $439million to Colombia in 2003[28]).

A key US policy in the war on drugs was the introduction of Plan Colombia in 2000. An initial military aid package of $1.3billion was provided for the stated objective of the eradication of coca plantations and 'narco-guerrillas'. The targeting of the left-wing guerrilla group FARC[29] by joint US and Colombian military initiatives has provoked criticism from observers of the situation in Colombia. While FARC 'tax' local coca cultivation in areas under their control, there is no evidence that they are involved in drug trafficking. Both Blakely and Stokes found that despite the US explicitly linking right-wing paramilitary groups with major drug production and trafficking, they continue to argue that FARC are criminal narco-guerrillas using the drug trade to fund their war with the state[30][31]. In her thesis, Blakely pointed out that US disregard of paramilitary involvement in the drug trade and human rights abuses is "unjustifiable"[32]. This disregard has lead to strong arguments that the US has used the war on drugs to repress left-wing groups that threaten its neoliberal ideology and corporate interests in Latin America.

This leads me to an interesting argument in the literature regarding the continuity in American foreign policy following the breakdown of the Soviet Union – and therefore the end of US-led anti-communism. While it is not my primary aim to discuss the changing nature of post-Cold War foreign policy, the discussion has important relevance to my analysis. The end of the Cold War brought with it the collapse of anti-communism as a basis for US foreign policy towards Latin America[33]. With this in mind, scholars have argued that the war on drugs essentially replaced the war on communism in many Latin American countries[34][35][36]. Stokes went as far as to call the war on drugs a "convenient justification" for the continuation of Cold War-era counter-insurgency since the fall of the Soviet Union[37]. Blakely argued that while repressive strategies continued, the US also employs 'instruments of legitimisation'[38] such as human rights training at WHINSEC[39][40]. While the training discourages support of right-wing paramilitaries and emphasises human rights, these ethics are not evident in the actions of graduates from WHINSEC. Takatlian argued that by its very nature as a war, the war on drugs focuses on repressive measures, transferring costs of the conflict to Latin American countries[41]. Presence of US law enforcement officials is also the source of resentment in Southern countries towards the US approach, worsening relations[42]. $1.4billion in anti-drug aid provided to Mexico and Central America in 2007 was similarly ineffective as Plan Colombia in reducing supply and the bloody violence waged by drug cartels escalated[43]. These anti-narcotic supply-side strategies serve American economic and strategic interests while not doing a great deal to effectively combat the flow of drugs from South America to the US.

Efforts to tackle demand for drugs at home have been comparatively weak and equally unsuccessful. Reagan's 1986 Anti-Drug Abuse Act hugely increased the US fight against domestic demand including enormous increase in

federal spending on drug control[44]. However, the amounts involved were still meagre compared to the billions made by the drug trade each year and cocaine consumption continued to rise throughout the 1980s. Clinton made efforts to deal with demand at the start of the 1990s, although it was "largely ineffective" due to the focus being on tougher penalties rather than treatment[45]. This policy has shifted since 2009 when it was reported that Obama's administration wished to consider the drug problem as a public health matter rather than one of criminal justice, banishing the term 'war on drugs'[46]. This coincided with arrest levels by the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), which peaked in 1999, but by 2009 had returned to just above late-1980s levels[47]. The lack of effective policy towards combating demand illustrates the assumption made by the US that reduced supply would have an impact on consumption in the States. The failure of the war on drugs demonstrates that this is not the case.

Official figures show that consumption of illegal drugs in the US is still increasing gradually each year. In 1979, 14.1% of the population aged 12 and older reported as having used drugs in the past thirty days. While this decreased during the 1990s, past month illegal drug use increased from 6.3% to 7.1% between 1999 and 2001. However, these figures might be misleading as in 1979, the proportion of people who had used drugs 'ever' was 31.3%, which increased to 41.7% in 2001[48]. This suggests that while the number of regular users decreased, more people overall were at least trying illegal drugs by 2001. While seizures of marijuana dramatically increased in 2008, US usage, like that of cocaine, has remained roughly the same over the last ten years[49]. This certainly suggests an increase in availability or at least a change in the cultural attitude towards illegal drugs.

The evident failure of the US-led war on drugs has lead to an increase in calls for legalisation, not only in the US and Canada but also in Southern countries. Several states including Argentina, Venezuela, Ecuador and Colombia have made moves to decriminalise small amounts of narcotics for personal use, in order to free up law enforcement energies for larger scale drug-related crimes[50]. Following their lead, Mexico's President Felipe Calderón called for a debate on the legalisation of drugs against the backdrop of a peak in drug war-related violence in July 2010[51]. This is evident of recent efforts by Latin American states to take control of their own drug wars.

In this essay I have shown that while the 'war on drugs' has involved efforts including crop eradication, stringent border control, tougher narcotics legislation and sanctions on governments, it has been undermined by several factors. Widespread corruption, weak institutions and social instability have served to strengthen the power of drug cartels in Latin American countries. Neoliberal US foreign policy has prioritised the protection of economic and strategic interests, compromising the efficacy of supply-side strategies. The US focus on countering left-wing insurgents while disregarding powerful paramilitary groups has attracted criticism from human rights groups and called into question the legitimacy of anti-drug policies. I have also shown how a lack of effective domestic policy to combat demand has had little impact on levels of consumption. With a rise in drug-related violence in countries such as Mexico, Latin American states are making moves towards legalisation as a solution to the crisis. Four decades and billions of dollars in financial and military aid later, the US has lost the 'war on drugs' and is focusing on combating domestic drug use.

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