

Addicted to Failure

It's time for Latin America to start breaking with Washington over the war on drugs.

By Ethan Nadelmann

P resident George W. Bush's early pronouncements about the importance of Latin America raised hopes for a new golden era in relations between the United States and its neighbors. But things haven't quite worked out according to expectation. Skirmishes over trade, economic policy, and the war in Iraq have completely eroded the optimism that greeted Bush's arrival in the White House two and a half years ago. Meanwhile, the region's manifold problems have only intensified. Rather than continuing to wait for a regional partnership that exists in communiqué form only, Latin America must begin to act in its own best interest. It can start by disentangling itself from the unwinnable war on drugs.

The futility of the war on drugs has long been obvious, but the evidence of failure grows starker each year. Attacking the supply side has yielded nothing: Drugs are cheaper, purer, and more plentiful than ever. Despite crop-eradication programs, there is substantially more opium poppy and coca cultivated today than there was two decades ago. Attempting to stamp out the supply of drugs is like pushing on a balloon—cut off production in one country and another quickly fills the void. Colombia, for instance, produced no heroin 15 years ago. Now the country is the leading supplier to the United States, having replaced Mexico, Turkey, Southeast Asia, and Southwest

Asia, each of which was a major source of heroin at one time or another.

Far from improving the health of nations, the war on drugs has cut a swath of misery and corruption throughout Latin America. Just as they have done in Medellín and other Colombian cities, drug gangs are turning the streets of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo into free-fire zones. Across the region, tens of thousands of farmers have seen both their livelihoods and land destroyed. (The pesticides and herbicides that are used to stamp out illicit crops frequently cause lasting environmental damage.) The enormous economic dislocation and intensifying waves of social unrest in Latin America are the results of failed prohibitionist policies, not drugs per se.

In all of human history, no society has ever been drug free, nor will any be so in the future. Drugs are not going to disappear; the challenge is to mitigate the harm they cause. The wisest course for Latin America would be legalization. The presidents of Mexico, Brazil, Bolivia, and Uruguay

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have all said or hinted as much. But legalization is still too radical an option; it is a common-sense solution whose time has not quite arrived. For now, countries in Latin America can lower the toll of both drugs and the war on drugs by pursuing three strategies: embracing the concept of “harm reduction,” rehabilitating the cultivation and sale of coca, and creating a “coalition of the willing” to resist Washington’s simplistic prohibitionist paradigm.

First, do no harm. The “harm reduction” approach, which was pioneered in Europe and

There would surely be substantial worldwide demand today for coca-based products such as lozenges, gums, teas, and tonics were it not for the current restrictions, and lifting them would provide a much-needed boost to economic development in both Bolivia and Peru. The effort to eradicate coca has been a complete flop, and a cruel one, too. The entire region should undertake a campaign to relegitimize coca.

Create Latin America’s own “coalition of the willing.” Indeed, the effort to bring some sanity to the discussion of drugs must be a regional

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Australia in the 1980s, uses a variety of means—methadone and heroin maintenance programs, needle exchanges, safer injection sites, and cannabis “coffee shops”—to reduce the personal destruction of drug use (overdoses and infectious diseases) and the social costs (criminality and black markets). It is a pragmatic policy that treats drugs for what they are: a public health issue, not a criminal justice one. With HIV/AIDS and drug abuse spreading throughout the region, some Latin American countries are already pursuing these ideas, but broader, more sweeping initiatives are needed. Harm reduction is also a sensible way of addressing illegal drug production and trafficking. Blanket suppression often proves counterproductive. De facto regulation, which is what harm reduction essentially amounts to, is the key to combating Latin America’s worst drug-related problems.

Restore coca’s good name. At the same time, the region should move to relegalize the sale of coca-based products. The coca plant, indigenous to Bolivia and Peru, has a number of sound uses and may well offer health and medicinal benefits. For instance, coca contains high levels of both calcium and phosphorus. The World Health Organization documented these positive effects in a landmark study produced in 1995. There was a thriving global market for coca a century ago.

project. No one Latin American government can stand up to Washington. But bullying Bolivia with the threat of an aid cutoff is one thing; bullying an entire region is quite another, and the United States would have a real problem were it to face an organized revolt involving a number of Latin American countries.

Such a coalition would attract members beyond Latin America. In Europe and Oceania, support for the war on drugs, never enthusiastic, has waned. Jamaica is in the process of decriminalizing cannabis. Change is also afoot to the north: Canada is moving forward with cannabis decriminalization, heroin maintenance trials, and safer injection sites. In short, when it comes to drugs, the United States is increasingly out of step with its neighbors and allies.

Now is a propitious moment for Latin America to break with the drug policies imposed on it by the United States. Leaders in the region should call the war on drugs what it is—a failure and a farce—and politely tell Washington that Latin America will no longer contribute to a callous, misguided effort that undermines the region’s economic prospects and social cohesion. Were Washington to pitch the inevitable fit and threaten sanctions, it might just be reminded that when dealing with friends, honesty, not hypocrisy, is usually the best policy. **FP**