



Coca Eradication

by Phillip Coffin

As early as 1925, the U.S. government advocated the destruction of crops used in drug production, including coca, opium poppy, and cannabis. Since 1995, however, when a National Security Council report recommended that international drug control priorities shift from drug interdiction to crop eradication, the United States has reinvigorated its eradication programs, most of which target coca cultivation in the South American Andes, believed to be the source of 100% of the cocaine in the United States.

In 1998, the U.S. budgeted \$500 million for international drug control, including crop eradication. Although this sum is less than a third of the drug interdiction budget, it is twice the allocation of a few years earlier. In September 1998, the House passed a bill authorizing an additional \$2.3 billion in funds for international counter-narcotics operations—including

over \$246 million for eradication programs and equipment in Mexico, Colombia, Bolivia, and Peru—with the aim of reducing illegal drug flows by 80 percent by 2001. The Andean countries where coca is grown are helping to finance and carry out eradication programs, and the United Nations Drug Control Program (UNDCP), under a proposed program to eliminate coca and opium poppy by 2008, commits much of its resources to eradication efforts.

been a simultaneous leap in the acreage under cultivation. Nearly one-half million acres of coca were reportedly eradicated in South America between 1985 and 1997, yet cultivation increased 87% from 295,000 to 552,000 acres.

Eradication programs are driven by the theory that decreasing coca production will make cocaine scarcer and more expensive and thereby decrease use; however, experience has proven this theory to be ineffective. When eradication programs succeed in reducing coca cultivation in one area, farmers elsewhere who maintain their plantations earn more for their coca, which in turn entices other farmers to move into or expand coca cultivation. At the same time, growers harvest more carefully, process leaves longer to extract more cocaine, and move to less accessible plots of land.

Historically there has been an enormous gap between coca prices in the Andean countries and black market cocaine prices in the United States. As a result, significant fluctuations in the price coca leaves fetch in South America affect cocaine prices in the U.S. by only pennies. A 1993 RAND Corporation study projects that even if eradication programs succeeded in cutting coca production by 50%, the price of cocaine on U.S. streets, after rising 150%, would return to baseline within 2 to 3 years. In 1994, RAND analyzed what the U.S. government would need to spend to reduce national cocaine consumption by just one percent. The researchers found source country efforts (including eradication) to be the most costly drug control strategy: 23 times more expensive than drug treatment programs.

In fact, there is little evidence that adjusting the price of cocaine significantly affects consumption. According to the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the retail price of a gram of cocaine dropped from \$158 in 1990 to \$94 in 1996. The fact that the number of cocaine users in the U.S. remained stable during that period suggests that price is not a crucial variable in predicting overall consumption.

Eradication has not succeeded by any measure. Since efforts began in earnest in the 1970s, cultivation has consistently increased. Today at least 52 million acres of viable land are available for cultivation, and experts estimate that the global demand for cocaine can be filled with just 14% of the current coca crop. When eradication is effective in one area, production increases elsewhere, indicating that effective eradication would require a major campaign with extreme ecological and political fallout and few if any benefits.

Key Points

- Eradication of drug crops was advocated by the U.S. as early as 1925 and has been a principal tool of source-country drug control efforts in the Andes since the early 1970s.
- A 1994 RAND study concluded that source-country drug control efforts are the least cost-effective means of controlling U.S. cocaine consumption.
- Eradication programs have escalated, but cocaine availability has shown no signs of decreasing.

Coca is eradicated both manually and with herbicides. In Peru and Bolivia, where some coca cultivation is legal and recognized as having significant religious and cultural roles, herbicidal eradication is banned. In Bolivia, where the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) funds voluntary eradication, farmers complain that neither fiscal compensation nor promised agricultural alternatives are delivered, while drug enforcement agents assert that farmers are eradicating worn-out plots of coca and planting new plots elsewhere. Manual eradication in Peru has been hindered by the difficulty of destroying the sturdy coca bush and by on-going counterinsurgency operations against guerrillas in Huallaga Valley. And in Colombia, where all coca cultivation is illegal, tens of thousands of acres of coca crop are sprayed each year, yet there has

Eradication programs are not merely ineffective, they undermine the U.S. objectives of promoting democracy, stability, and human rights in South America. They also run counter to local customs and practices among Andean peasants and place the environment at unnecessary risk. Hundreds of thousands of farmers in Andean countries march against eradication every year and demand economic alternatives. They also complain that herbicides are damaging food crops and causing medical problems.

Eradication programs may even foster alliances between peasants and guerrillas against the state. Since Colombia reinvigorated widescale herbicidal eradication in 1995, guerrilla groups have steadily expanded their areas of control and now represent a significant threat to the government. By defending impoverished farming communities that grow coca from what are seen as U.S. imperialist forces and goals, guerrillas gain political and financial strength.

International monitoring agencies report increasing judicial and human rights violations committed by military units and other state agents engaged in eradication activities in the Andean countries. A 1996 Human Rights Watch study documented violations in the Chapare region of Bolivia, including misuse of firearms, arbitrary and unlawful arrests, careless use of tear gas, and slipshod investigations into civilian deaths and injuries. Thus, by setting minimum standards for coca eradication, the U.S. has pressured the Bolivian government to ignore human rights and due process concerns to achieve eradication targets.

In Peru, as well, human rights groups complain that the U.S. is providing expanded anti-narcotics assistance to security forces, despite the undemocratic and repressive nature of President Alberto Fujimori's government. And although U.S. officials hail Peru as a success story because cultivation dropped nearly 30% between 1996 and 1997, the drop was not due to eradication as Peru has not engaged in widescale eradication since the 1980s. Rather, many experts credit increased interdiction of traffickers' aircraft between Peru and Colombia and a mysterious fungus for the drop in production. Moreover, according to Peruvian drug trade analysts, there is now a reactivation of growing and a diversification of trafficking routes.

More importantly, as coca growing in Peru has declined, cultivation in Colombia has skyrocketed, leaving total production for the Andean region largely unchanged.

Although U.S. drug enforcement agents often claim that coca production is harmful to the Andean environment, coca is one of the least noxious plants in the region. A 1980 report commissioned by USAID concluded that "coca's effects on the environment seem average or even benign, especially in comparison with other crops that are grown in the region." However, the constant movement and secretive nature of the illicit drug trade make it difficult to promote safe and efficient cultivation methods. Anti-narcotics offensives drive both growers and cocaine traffickers further

into the jungle, forcing them from roads and accessible lands.

According to U.S. State Department and UNDCP data, approximately 1.75 million acres have been deforested for the coca/cocaine trade over the past 15 years, while less than a third of that land is currently used to cultivate coca. A coca bush will produce harvests for as long as 35 years, yet after just a few years two-thirds of coca plots are deserted, denuded by pursuing eradication forces and left to erode under seasonal rains. Moreover, farmers monocrop coca so as to maximize output and allow for easy harvesting, leaving the fragile soil exposed to constant sunshine. Multiple annual harvests on the steep terrain exacerbate soil erosion, and improper use of chemical fertilizers causes water contamination. Finally, clandestine processing of coca leaf into cocaine paste involves a series of toxic chemicals that are causing further environmental pollution.

This environmental degradation is in stark contrast to the experience of coca growers in the Yungas of Bolivia, where coca is grown legally. Here, as well as in other regions in Peru and Bolivia, coca is produced for licit domestic and international markets, including pharmaceutical cocaine and flavor extracts used in Coca Cola and a handful of other products. Farmers often remain on one plot of land for decades. Their cultivation techniques include growing large leafy plants around coca bushes to protect the soil from the sun, planting the bushes in deep pits to allow for the formation of sturdier root structures, and constructing stone terraces to allow for harvesting on level terrain. These practices, common centuries ago, are rare today because most cultivation is clandestine.

Of additional concern are recent news reports of U.S. involvement in developing biologically-designed fungi to wipe out coca. These virulent fungi pose the same ethical and environmental hazards as any other form of biological warfare. In addition, there are reports that the Colombian government has been clandestinely testing tebuthiuron, and the U.S. has been pressuring Colombia to use this granular herbicide in eradication programs. Such use goes against the explicit admonition of its manufacturer, Dow Agrosciences, and the conclusions of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in its 1994 Reregistration Eligibility Decision report. U.S. narcotics policy, however, prioritizes the goals of eradication over the risks posed to human and plant ecologies by biological and chemical experimentation. As Charles Helling, of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's narcotics group, told Reuters in May 1998, "The benefits are so strong," they outweigh the risks.

Key Problems

- Eradication programs in Andean countries have exacerbated human rights violations, helped forge alliances between guerrillas and peasant growers, and strengthened undemocratic governments.
 - Eradication efforts lead to significant environmental damage.
 - The risks of herbicidal and biological weapons are often ignored by U.S. drug policy officials.
-

A major impact of the U.S. foreign policy to eradicate coca has been a reduction in trade in unprocessed coca leaf. The coca leaf, which contains about 1% cocaine and has been used for millennia by indigenous people in the Andes, was included in hundreds of low-potency prescription and over-the-counter products at the turn of the century. Although there were no reports of negative reactions to or habitual use of products containing coca, strict regulations against pure cocaine were applied to all coca products, irrespective of potency. The result has been near elimination of the relatively benign market in low-potency, coca-based products while the cocaine trade continues to thrive.

Various studies by French, German, and USAID experts found scientific, medical, and cultural reasons to allow the continued use of coca in the Andes. The World Health Organization and UN's Interregional

Crime and Justice Research Institute's Cocaine Project concluded in 1994 that coca users show none of the classic signs of addiction. As trade in coca leaf and low-potency, coca-based products pose no apparent threats to public health and safety, the U.S. should recognize legitimate coca production in Andean countries and permit limited international trade in low-potency, coca-based products such as coca leaf tea.

Although expansion and regulation of legal coca production may have loopholes that could

be abused by corrupt officials, drug control experiences elsewhere suggest that restricted legal outlets can be superior to outright prohibition in controlling the production of and trade in crops used to manufacture drugs.

In the late 1960s, for instance, Turkey had reduced the number of provinces allowed to legally grow opium poppy from 27 to four centralized provinces that were

more accessible to authorities. At President Nixon's urging, however, opium cultivation was banned outright in 1972, leading authorities to complain that they had lost tax revenue from legal opium sales and that they could not enforce the ban or effectively implement crop substitution plans. Farmers reported economic troubles and illicit opium cultivation spread to other provinces and other countries. Turkey later rescinded the ban in favor of a scheme requiring farmers to be licensed and turn in whole poppy straw to the state.

One explanation for the later success of the Turkish poppy straw scheme may be the pressure imposed on individual growers to stay out of the illicit opium market by a community reliant upon legal sales. Similarly, permitting an expansion of legal production and sale of coca leaf under certain conditions could provide greater leverage than the tools of prohibition, which—however stringent—are insufficient to outweigh the economic and political costs of coca control.

Would it send the wrong message for the U.S. to permit trade in coca leaf while opposing trade in cocaine? Just as beer is regulated differently than hard liquor and codeine than morphine, there is every reason to regulate coca and coca-based products differently than processed cocaine. Coca was banned along with cocaine early this century in part because of the lack of technological and political mechanisms to regulate similar substances differently. Those mechanisms exist today, and utilizing them may actually increase the ability of U.S. foreign policy to control the illicit cocaine trade.

The United States should shift resources away from coca eradication, the weakest link in the drug control chain. Poor farmers will continue to grow coca for the illicit cocaine market as long as there are no viable alternatives. In addition to permitting expanded licit production and sale of coca products, U.S. authorities should focus resources on alternative development programs for the Andean countries.

Phillip Coffin is a research associate at The Lindesmith Center, a New York-based drug policy think tank.

Key Recommendations

- The U.S. should reevaluate not just the methods but also the goals of its eradication and other source country drug control programs.
- Restricted trade in coca leaf would alleviate tensions created by source country drug control tactics.
- Forced eradication should be discontinued and the funds transferred to economic development programs for the Andean countries.



Visit the Internet Gateway to Foreign Policy Information



<http://www.foreignpolicy-infocus.org>

Foreign Policy in Focus is a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS). The project depends on sales and subscription income, individual donors, and grants from The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, General Service Foundation, and various church organizations. *In Focus* internships are available.

Editors
Martha Honey (IPS)
Tom Barry (IRC)

Production
Grant Moser

Communications Director
Erik Leaver (IRC)

Orders and subscription information:

Mail: PO Box 4506
Albuquerque, New Mexico 87196-4506
Voice: (505) 842-8288
Fax: (505) 246-1601
Email: resourcectr@igc.apc.org

Editorial inquiries and information:

IRC Editor	IPS Editor
Voice: (505) 388-0208	Voice: (202) 234-9382/3 ext. 232
Fax: (505) 388-0619	Fax: (202) 387-7915
Email: resourcectr@igc.apc.org	Email: ipsps@igc.apc.org

Website: <http://www.foreignpolicy-infocus.org>

Sources for More Information

Organizations

The Lindesmith Center

400 West 59th St.
New York NY 10019
Voice: (212)548-0695
Fax: (212)548-4670
Email: lindesmith@sorosny.org
Website: <http://www.lindesmith.org>
Contact: Phillip Coffin

Washington Office on Latin America

1630 Connecticut Ave. NW, 2nd Floor
Washington, DC 20009
Voice: (202) 797-2171
Fax: (202) 797-2172
Email: wola@wola.org
Website: <http://www.wola.org>

Human Rights Watch

350 Fifth Avenue, 34th Fl.
New York, NY 10018-3299
Voice: (212) 290-4700
Fax: (212) 736-1300
Email: hrwnyc@hrw.org
Website: <http://www.hrw.org>

Centro de Documentación e Información- Bolivia (CEDIB)

Calle Calama 255, Casilla 3302
Cochabamba – Bolivia
Voice: 591-42-57839
Fax: 591-42-52401
Email: postmaster@cedib.org
Website: <http://www.cedib.org/>

RAND Corporation

1700 Main Street
P.O. Box 2138
Santa Monica, CA 90407-2138
Voice: (310) 393-0411
Fax: (310) 393-4818
Email: jess_cook@rand.org
Website: <http://www.rand.org>
Contact: Jess Cook, Public Information Director

Felipe E. MacGregor, *Coca and cocaine: An Andean perspective* (Westport, CT:Greenwood Press, 1993).

William Golden Mortimer, *History of coca: "The divine plant" of the Incas* (San Francisco: And/or Press, 1974).

Graham Farrell, "A global empirical review of drug crop eradication and United Nations' crop substitution and alternative development strategies," *Journal of Drug Issues*, 28(2) 395-436, 1998.

Joseph Spillane, "Did drug prohibition work? Reflections on the end of the first cocaine experience in the United States, 1910-45," *Journal of Drug Issues*, 28(2) 517-538, 1998.

Publications

Kevin Jack Riley, *Snow Job? The War Against International Cocaine Trafficking* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1996).

William O. Walker III, ed., *Drugs in the Western Hemisphere: An odyssey of cultures in conflict* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1996).

Comments on the *In Focus* briefs are found in *The Progressive Response*, the project's weekly electronic forum. To subscribe, send email to newusfp-manager@zianet.com with the message: "join newusfp."

Subscription Information

You can subscribe to *In Focus* at one of three levels, receive *In Focus* in one of five ways, and choose which categories of *In Focus* you want to receive. Mark the level of subscription you want, how you want *In Focus* delivered, and the topic categories you want. No extra charge for email delivery to mail and fax subscribers. (Individual copies of *In Focus* are \$2.50, postpaid; bulk orders of *In Focus* are \$12.00 for 10 copies of the same issue, postpaid; orders for delivery outside the US are double the listed prices. Subscriptions do not include back issues. Contact the IRC for a list of available back issues.) Make checks payable to the Interhemispheric Resource Center. We also accept VISA and MasterCard.

U.S. Subscription Level

- \$15 10 briefs
 \$30 20 briefs
 \$60 50 briefs

Foreign Subscription Level

- \$30 10 briefs
 \$60 20 briefs
 \$120 50 briefs

Delivery

- Regular mail Regular mail & email
 Fax only Fax and email
 Email only

Topic Categories

- | | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> All (receive all briefs) | <input type="checkbox"/> Economic Aid | <input type="checkbox"/> Mexico |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Foreign Policy Overview | <input type="checkbox"/> Global Governance/United Nations | <input type="checkbox"/> South America |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Trade and Investment | <input type="checkbox"/> International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and Debt | <input type="checkbox"/> Africa |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Government Agencies | <input type="checkbox"/> Food and Farm | <input type="checkbox"/> Middle East |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Military and Peace | <input type="checkbox"/> Border and Immigration | <input type="checkbox"/> Asia/Pacific |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Human Rights and Democracy | <input type="checkbox"/> Central America | <input type="checkbox"/> Western Europe |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Environment | <input type="checkbox"/> Caribbean | <input type="checkbox"/> Central and Eastern Europe |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Labor | | <input type="checkbox"/> Former Soviet Union |

Name		Institution	
Street Address			
City		State	Zip Code
VISA/MasterCard Number		Expiration Date	
Signature	Daytime Phone	Fax Number	Email Address

Send subscription to:

Interhemispheric Resource Center ♦ Box 4506 ♦ Albuquerque, NM 87196-4506

Voice: (505) 842-8288 ♦ Fax: (505) 246-1601 ♦ Email: resourcectr@igc.apc.org ♦ Website: <http://www.foreignpolicy-infocus.org>