



Coca Eradication

By Phillip Coffin, New York Academy of Medicine with Jeremy Bigwood

As early as 1925, the U.S. government advocated the destruction of crops used in drug production, including coca, opium poppy, and cannabis. U.S.-sponsored drug crop eradication started in Mexico after President Nixon's war on drugs was launched in 1968. When a 1995 National Security Council report recommended that international drug control priorities shift from drug interdiction to crop eradication, the United States reinvigorated its eradication programs, much of them aimed at coca cultivation in the South American Andes, the source of most cocaine in the United States.

In 1999, Congress passed the Western Hemisphere Drug Elimination Act authorizing \$2.3 billion for international counternarcotics 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% by 2001. This clearly has not achieved the intended effect: today, more cocaine at cheaper prices is entering the U.S. In August 2000, the U.S. Congress passed Plan Colombia, a \$1.3-billion counterdrug effort to operate mainly in Colombia. Plan Colombia is largely a military offensive, using the Colombian army and police as U.S. proxies not only against

cultivation in one area, other farmers whose plantations survive eradication earn more for their coca, which in turn entices even more farmers to move into or expand coca cultivation. Increasingly, growers harvest more carefully, process leaves longer to extract more cocaine, and cultivate less accessible plots of land that are deeper into the jungle. In addition, cultivation is growing in other countries. In Colombia, where small amounts of coca cultivation for traditional use is legal, cultivation for cocaine has skyrocketed in the wake of U.S.-funded eradication programs in Peru and Bolivia.

Currently the U.S. is financing and coordinating Colombian police and army operations that are spraying tens of thousands of acres of coca with chemical herbicides each year. In 2000, although 128,000 acres were fumigated in Colombia, the net area under coca cultivation actually increased. 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.

Even if eradication is successful in wiping out coca in South America, production is almost certain to expand in other parts of the world. Coca has been cultivated in India, Indonesia, and Taiwan, as well as in Hawaii and Florida; it could be easily grown in sub-Saharan Africa.

Second, the enormous gap between coca prices in the Andean countries and black market cocaine prices in the United States means that significant fluctuations in the selling price of coca leaves in South America affect U.S. cocaine prices only temporarily. A 1993 RAND Corporation study projects that even if eradication programs were to succeed in cutting coca production by 50%, the price of cocaine on U.S. streets, after rising 150%, would return to baseline within two to three years. In 1994, RAND analyzed what the U.S. government would need to spend to reduce national cocaine consumption by just 1%. The researchers found source-country efforts (including eradication) to be the most costly drug control strategy: 23 times as expensive as drug treatment programs.

Third, there is little evidence that adjusting the price of cocaine significantly affects consumption. According to the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the retail price of cocaine dropped from \$158 per gram in 1990 to between \$60 and \$80 in 2001. The fact that the number of cocaine users in the U.S. has remained stable at about 1.5 million over the past decade suggests that price is not a crucial variable in predicting overall consumption.

Key Points

- Drug crop eradication has produced little effect on the price or availability of cocaine in the United States.
- Chemical and manual eradication programs have pushed growers deeper into the jungle, where they fell more virgin forest to grow their crops.
- Gains in reducing coca cultivation in one area are subverted by its resurgence in another.

drug crops but also against insurgents.

Coca is currently eradicated both manually and with chemical herbicides. At least for now, U.S. plans to use fungal mycoherbicides against drug plants have been discarded on the grounds that their deployment would be generally perceived as biological or biochemical warfare. In both Peru and Bolivia, where some coca cultivation is legal and recognized as having significant cultural and medicinal roles—even by the U.S. State Department—only manual eradication is permitted. Even so, there is a distinct perception amongst the peasant and Indian populations that the U.S. wishes not only to eliminate the cocaine trade but also to eliminate the benign culture of coca use as well.

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 fallacious. First, when eradication programs succeed in reducing coca

Problems with Current U.S. Policy

In Peru, Bolivia, and Colombia, human rights groups worry that the U.S. is providing expanded counternarcotics assistance to security forces, despite the undemocratic and repressive nature of their governments. In Peru, between 1990 and 2000, the U.S. backed President Alberto Fujimori and his intelligence chief Vladimiro Montesinos, despite their abysmal human rights records and evidence of the latter's ties to drug trafficking. In Bolivia, the U.S. backs the recycled dictator, President Hugo Banzer, despite reports that he was connected to drug traffickers in the past. In Colombia, Washington has massively funded the army and police forces, ignoring evidence of their ties to paramilitary death squads and other human rights abuses.

Although U.S. officials hail Peru as a success story because coca cultivation dropped nearly 30% between 1996 and 1997, the drop was not due solely to eradication. Rather, the drop was triggered by the *Fusarium oxysporum* fungal epidemic that swept through Peru's Huallaga Valley in the 1980s and 1990s, a shift in production to Colombia, and increased interdiction of traffickers' aircraft between Peru and Colombia. Moreover, according to drug trade analysts, there is now a reactivation of cultivation in Peru and a diversification of trafficking routes. We can expect this same scenario in Ecuador, Brazil, and Venezuela also, if Plan Colombia reduces coca output from Colombia. The important lesson is that as long as there is a demand for cocaine, it will be supplied from somewhere.

Eradication programs also foster alliances between peasants and guerrillas against the state and could produce new insurgencies. By defending impoverished coca farming communities from what are seen as U.S. imperialist forces and goals, guerrillas gain political and financial strength. When in the 1990s, the U.S. reinvigorated wide-scale herbicidal eradication in Colombia, both guerrilla groups and paramilitaries steadily expanded their areas of control.

In Bolivia, where the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) funds voluntary and forced manual eradication, farmers complain that neither fiscal compensation nor promised agricultural alternatives are offered. Given the lack of markets and transportation for the legal alternative crops, drug enforcement agents report that farmers are instead planting new coca plots elsewhere. In Peru, manual eradication has been increasingly hindered by the demonstrations of organized coca farmers in the Huallaga Valley, the lack of a viable replacement crop, the sheer vastness of the area where coca is grown, and the endemic corruption associated with the illicit drug trade and drug prohibition. Thus, a renewed and less violent Shining Path rebel movement is slowly growing again in Peru, and the Chapare region of Bolivia may at any time erupt into insurgency.

International monitoring agencies report increased judicial and human rights violations committed by military units and other U.S.-backed state agents engaged in eradication activities in the Andean countries. U.S.-funded proxy forces include the UMOPAR in Bolivia, CORAH in Peru, and the National Police and army antinarcotics in Colombia. Their members are better equipped, paid, and insured than the national armed

forces, causing jealousies and discontent among less privileged units. A 1996 Human Rights Watch study documented UMOPAR 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, a trend that continues today, according to press reports. By setting minimum standards for coca destruction, the U.S. has pressured the Bolivian government to ignore human rights and due process concerns to achieve eradication goals.

Coca, as cultivated for tradition use, is one of the least noxious plants in the region, since it requires less fertilizers and pesticides than many food crops. 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. Antinarcotics offensives drive both growers and cocaine traffickers further into the jungle, forcing them from roads and accessible lands.

Approximately 1.75 million acres of mainly rainforest have been deforested for the coca/cocaine trade over the past 15 years, though 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 currently, 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 often 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 and parts of Peru, where coca is grown legally. There, coca leaves are grown for licit domestic and tiny 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 facilitate 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 short-term and clandestine, rendering sustainable practices a poor investment.

Key Problems

- Eradication programs have exacerbated human rights violations, strengthened undemocratic governments, and helped forge alliances between guerrillas and peasant growers.
 - America's war on drugs is widely perceived as hypocritical and bullying.
 - Eradication efforts lead to significant environmental damage when coca growers cultivate steep hillsides, expose fragile soil, and use toxic chemicals and fertilizers.
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Toward a New Foreign Policy

A major impact of America's efforts to eradicate coca has been a reduction in trade in unprocessed coca leaf. The coca leaf, which contains less than 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 in the late

1800s and early 1900s. Although there were no reports of negative reactions to or habitual use of products containing coca, strict prohibition against a distinct class of pure cocaine products was applied to all coca products, irrespective of potency. The result has been the near elimination of the relatively benign market in low-potency coca-based products, while the illicit cocaine trade continues to thrive.

Various studies by French, German, and USAID experts have found scientific, medical, and cultural reasons to allow the continued use of coca in the Andes. Two United Nations

bodies—the World Health Organization and the Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute's Cocaine Project—concluded in 1994 that coca users exhibit none of the classic signs of addiction. Since trade in coca leaf and low-potency coca-based products poses no apparent threat 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 and chewing gums.

Although expansion and regulation of legal coca production may have loopholes that could be abused by corrupt officials, drug control experiences in Holland and 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.

By the late 1960s, for instance, Turkey had successfully reduced the number of regions allowed to legally grow opium poppy from 27 to four centralized provinces that were more accessible to authorities. Then, at President Nixon's urging, opium cultivation was banned outright in 1972. Turkish authorities complained that they were losing 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 system requiring farmers to be licensed and to produce poppies for the state.

One factor in the eventual success of the Turkish poppy scheme was the peer pressure imposed on individual growers to eschew growing illicit opium in order to preserve the legal market upon which the community relied. 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 and codeine are regulated differently than hard liquor and morphine, there is every reason to regulate coca and coca-based products differently than processed cocaine. Coca was banned along with cocaine in the early 1900s 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.

Eradication has not succeeded by any measure. Since efforts began in earnest in the 1970s, cultivation has consistently increased. Today, experts estimate that the global demand for cocaine can be filled with just 14% of the current coca crop.

The United States should shift resources away from coca eradication abroad—the most distant link in the drug control chain—and concentrate on harm reduction, public education, and medical treatment at home. In addition to permitting expanded licit production and sale of coca products, U.S. authorities should focus resources on adequately financing and supporting alternative development programs for the Andean countries. Poor farmers will continue to grow coca for the illicit cocaine market as long as there are no viable alternatives.

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Key Recommendations

- Forced eradication should be discontinued and the funds transferred to economic development programs for the Andean countries.
- If they continue, crop eradication programs in Latin America need to be monitored and open to on-site spot checks by professionals, journalists, and NGOs who are free to examine all aspects of these programs.
- Restricted, regulated trade in coca leaf would alleviate tensions spawned by source-country drug control tactics.

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 foundations and churches. *In Focus* internships are available, and we invite article queries and comments. ISSN 1524-1939

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