

Drugs & Terrorism

by Mike Gray

With the laudable goal of knocking the props out from under international terrorism, House Speaker Dennis Hastert announced last month that he has formed a task force to combat drug trafficking. "The illegal drug trade," says Hastert, "is the financial engine that fuels many terrorist organizations around the world, including Osama Bin Laden."

Unfortunately, the 48-member "Speaker's Task Force for a Drug Free America" will be led by drug war hawks whose instincts are almost certain to make matters worse. Hastert and his co-chairmen are staunch supporters of current drug policy even though three out of four Americans believe that policy has failed. Ironically, most of these lawmakers are champions of free-market capitalism and they'd be the first to admit that you can't mess with the law of supply and demand. But in this one arena – drugs – they believe they can somehow repeal the most basic law of economics.

History, logic, and recent experience suggest otherwise. If, for example, we were somehow able to actually dent the drug supply -- something we have not managed so far with a \$50-billion annual effort -- the price will just go up and so will the profits.

For 80 years we have been trying to wipe out illegal drugs by eliminating the supply, and year by year we have compounded the problem. When we began this crusade in 1914 we set out to rid the world of the scourge of addiction, and after an incalculable expenditure of money and lives we have managed to increase the rate of addiction by 1500 percent. It turns out you cannot alter the fundamental equation of economics, no matter how much money, force, or firepower you throw at it. Daredevil entrepreneurs, attracted by unimaginable profits, will find ways to corrupt the system and expand their markets.

It will be fairly easy, however, for Mr. Hastert and his colleagues to make things worse. Consider Colombia, one of our major partners in the war on drugs, a country that is literally going down the drain right in front of us as revolutionaries, death squads, and corrupt army officers fight for control of the drug trade. Back in the 1980s Colombia went through a horrifying bout with terrorism when the U.S. was chasing the notorious drug lord, Pablo Escobar. Like Osama Bin Laden, Escobar considered human life expendable and he liked to blow people up to get our attention. In his time, he killed hundreds of innocent people before the U.S. put together a secret Colombian commando force to track him down. But the men in charge were so terrified of Escobar that they invited his underworld competitors to join the hunt -- another classic example of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." When Escobar was finally gunned down, these other traffickers simply replaced him and they proved to be much more efficient. Today, despite our best efforts, drug production in that luckless country is raging out of control.

Colombian High Court Justice Gomez Hurtado has some shrapnel in his leg from one of Escobar's bombs and he has something to tell us about terrorism. At a drug policy conference in Baltimore nearly a decade ago, Gomez Hurtado gave a chilling snapshot of the trouble we're in. He said, "The income of the drug barons is greater than the American defense budget. With this financial power they can suborn the institutions of the State and, if the State resists... they can purchase the firepower to outgun it. We are threatened with a return to the Dark Ages."

As we stand transfixed at the specter of 21st Century vandals assaulting the governments of one country after another, it's important to remember that this particular plague could be terminated with the stroke of a pen. The vast illegal enterprises that the U.N. says are raking in some \$400 billion a year -- the powerful, murderous combines that threaten to overwhelm the rule of law itself -- all could be cut off instantly by simply taking the

drug trade out of the hands of the gangsters and putting it in the hands of government regulators -- just as we finally were forced to do with alcohol.

Those who argue that the cure would be worse than the disease should take another look at the disease.

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