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Drug Control in the Americas: A History of Conflict and Failure

Few economic enterprises can command the market power and earning potential of the contemporary narcotics trade. Purchases in Europe and the United States alone of cannabis, cocaine, and heroin, the three most popular illegal drugs, may surpass $120 billion annually, a sum greater than the gross domestic product of any Latin American country except Brazil and Mexico. Current demographic, economic, and technological trends suggest that the global markets for illicit substances will only continue to grow in the early decades of the twenty-first century.

If present-day methods of drug control have not managed to suppress narcotics trafficking, their prospects for success over the next generation would appear to be even slimmer. (A brief summary of anticipated future global drug market patterns may be found in Paul B. Stares, *Global Habit: The Drug Problem in a Borderless World* [Washington: Brookings Institution, 1996].) As William O. Walker III notes in the introduction to this new edited volume in the Jaguar Books series, "the conflict over drugs in the Americas will persist into its second century" (p. xxiv).

A professor of history at Ohio Wesleyan University, Walker is a recognized authority on the history of narcotics and author of *Drug Control in the Americas*, rev. ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989) and *Opium and Foreign Policy: The Anglo-American Search for Order in Asia, 1912-1954* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991). In *Drugs in the Western Hemisphere*, Walker has assembled a collection of interesting documents intended to show the cultural and historical roots of narcotics issues. He notes that "the study of drugs necessarily becomes a study of cultures in competition....The history of drugs, more than simply a study of drug control, is fundamentally a study of culture" (p. xiv).

Since early in the twentieth century, the United States has sought "solutions" to hemispheric drug problems through the eradication of coca, marijuana, and opium cultivation in Latin America. In Walker's view, this approach to drug control has amassed an impressive record of failure. While he notes that "how best to control drugs has been and remains a vexing question with no easy answer..." (p. 1), he criticizes the historical predilection of U.S. officialdom to characterize "drug cultures" as outlaw social elements. "Drug cultures are not at all alien to the Americas," he argues; "they have been and will likely remain an integral, though misrepresented, aspect of its history" (p. xv).

Drugs in the Western Hemisphere contains forty-six documentary selections intended to substantiate this argument. They consist of original primary sources as well as secondary accounts. Walker has arranged these materials in six chronological sections that enable the reader to see the continuity of drug control issues across the twentieth century: I. Cultures in Conflict; II. Drugs in Latin America, 1920-1940; III. The Wartime Experience; IV. Confrontations and Controversy; V. Drugs and Security; and VI. Drugs in the Americas: An Assessment. Walker's introductory essay to the volume, his short introductions to the six sections, his paragraph-long statements preceding each documentary selection, and the inclusion of two excerpts from his own published work are intended to provide unity to *Drugs in the Western Hemisphere*.

The items included in section I demonstrate to the reader that issues of drug control in the Americas derive from deep historical and cultural origins. Selections from W. Golden Mortimer's *The History of Coca* (1901) and Joseph A. Gagliano's *The Coca Debate in Colonial Peru* (1994) make it clear that the regulation of the production and consumption of the Andean coca leaf has been extraordinarily difficult for centuries. Like some present-day efforts at coca eradication, prohibition efforts by Spanish clerics in the mid-sixteenth century could not overcome coca's essential economic and cultural role in sustaining indigenous society in the highlands. Just as modern Bolivian and Peruvian governments often find themselves powerless to offer a significant economic alternative to coca growing, sixteenth-century prohibitionists were forced to recognize that both government revenues and the indigenous labor supply for the mines would be powerfully disrupted by the absence of coca.

Herbert Klein's "Coca Production in the Bolivian Yungas in the Colonial and Early National Periods" (1986) indicates the role coca has played in stabilizing society and facilitating indigenous adaptation to major historical changes from the sixteenth though the twentieth centuries. Klein's article offers the best historical description in *Drugs in the Western Hemisphere* of a "drug culture" as an interlinked set of socioeconomic systems rooted in the material possibilities and limits of local geography. Until the 1960s, the Yungas valleys constituted Bolivia's primary zone of coca leaf production, producing largely for the consumption of domestic leaf chewers and for those who had gone as migrant workers into the sugar fields of northern Argentina. Klein's final paragraph establishes the difference between these older traditional patterns of coca growing and the rapid expansion of cultivation in the Chapare region since the 1960s as a raw material for illicit cocaine production. (See also Flavio Machicado, "Coca Production in Bolivia," *Drug Policy in the Americas*, ed. Peter H. Smith [Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1992], p. 88.)

Subsequent selections in Section I from F. E. Oliver on opium use in the United States (1872) and from the report of the National Commission on Marihuana and Drug Abuse (1972) reinforce the point that types of "drug cultures" can subsist for long periods of time as part of mainstream society. Not altogether unlike Andean highlanders for whom coca chewing historically deadened hunger and provided endurance amid exploitation and misery, nineteenth-century industrial proletarians "found sugar and kindred drug foods profound consolations in the mines and in the factories" (Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* [New York: Penguin Books, 1985, p. 61).

Aside from such "drug foods," tobacco and alcohol were the only drugs used extensively in the United States for nonmedical purposes until the last half of the nineteenth century. By the early twentieth century, however, problems of opium, morphine, heroin, and cocaine addiction had arisen, largely among elements of the middle class. The Harrison Act, passed by the federal government in 1914, helped to consolidate a regime of dealing with addiction by prohibition and criminalization. While such an approach was abandoned for alcoholic beverages, it has continued and intensified throughout the rest of the century with drugs. A selection from Harry J. Anslinger's *The Murders* (1961) embodies this restrictionist approach toward drugs in the words of the powerful head of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics between 1930 and 1962. Section I of the volume concludes with a 1912 memo from Acting Secretary of State Huntington Wilson that demonstrates the transformation of prohibition into an international diplomatic strategy. Walker labels this document "the origins of Inter-American drug control" (p. 51).

Sections II through V of *Drugs in the Western Hemisphere* exhibit the expanding pretensions of Inter-American drug control efforts as well as their inevitable collisions with Latin American societies. State Department documents chosen for inclusion in *Drugs in the Western Hemisphere* show repeated conflicts with the governments of Honduras, Mexico, and Peru. U.S. officials, as Walker puts it, "displayed an air of entitlement" (p. 51) about their intervention in the affairs of other societies. In Mexico between 1936 and 1940, for example, Anslinger and other members of the U.S. government pressured high-level Mexican officials from office and prevented the country from instituting clinic-based treatment programs for addicts. Only the good working relationship between Ambassador Josephus Daniels and Mexican public health official Jose Siurob prevented tension between the two governments from becoming measurably worse. Generally U.S. diplomats seem to have exhibited an innate distrust of the Latin American regimes to which they were accredited rather than any sensitivity to the domestic economic and political difficulties related to drug control.

El Cronista, a Tegucigalpa newspaper, expressed dismay in 1934 that U.S. officials seemed hardly aware that "Honduras, which has a prominent coast on the Atlantic Ocean and numerous small islands and inlets along with

expanses of land where few people live, is not able to exercise much supervision over these areas and remains, therefore, a constant victim of the drug smugglers" (p. 83). Training its indignation on internal U.S. failings, much as Colombians would later vent their anger at the reelection of Marion Barry as mayor of Washington after a conviction for cocaine possession, *El Cronista* went on to say that "we ought not to blame our government for its shortcomings because it is well known that those U.S. officials who are highly dedicated to halting the traffic in contraband, despite having an army of investigators and despite spending many dollars against the illegal liquor trade, were not able to keep their nation dry as was mandated by the Volstead Law" (p. 84).

Often the vivid language of primary documents surpasses the capacity of secondary texts to convey to readers the power of historically entrenched attitudes. Many of the documents selected by Walker illustrate the formidable racism and imperiousness that could accompany U.S. bureaucratic efforts to oblige Latin American countries to eradicate the production of offending crops. "These Andean Indians are one of the lowest of human races," wrote a U.S. diplomat from Lima in 1932. "They are undersized and undernourished, and after centuries of mistreatment they have become placidly resigned to a semi-animal existence. Their intelligence probably averages lower than that of any natives of the Americas, with the possible exception of those of Haiti and Patagonia" (pp. 111-112). In 1942, George Morlock of the Department of State threatened to cut Peru off from "all sources of narcotic drugs" and to cease U.S. purchases of coca leaves. "This last could be accomplished very simply," he affirmed, "by growing coca in Puerto Rico, where the production has been eliminated in order to give Peru its market" (pp. 117-118).

Other documentary selections show the various methods that Latin Americans explored to deal with the "drug cultures" in their midst. Editorials from the Mexico City newspaper *Excelsior* (1936) and the Lima daily *El Comercio* (1945) severely questioned why their own governments permitted the spread of addiction and were so grossly unable to enforce national drug laws. In a seeming description of the 1980s and 1990s in Colombia and Mexico, a 1944 State Department account of a raid against poppy fields in Durango related the fears of local officials "that some of those whose poppy fields were destroyed may come into Durango and assassinate them" (p. 129). A 1978 article by Richard Craig evaluates the relatively meager results obtained by Mexico despite its major efforts under "La Campana Permanente" in the 1970s to eradicate opium and marijuana cultivation as well as to stop narcotics shipments to the United States.

Several fascinating documents lay out aspects of the trans-generational debate over the physiological and psychological effects of the coca leaf. Writing in 1932 on behalf of the Society of Property Owners of the Yungas (the coca-growing region of Bolivia described earlier by Klein), Dr. Nicanor Fernandez not surprisingly offered a vigorous (and sometimes fanciful) defense of the merits of coca. He noted that the Bolivian middle and upper classes, just like critical and misguided officials of the League of Nations, "do not chew coca. They believe that Indians use it in their poverty and ignorance, and that usage amounts to a vice." Yet, Fernandez argued for "the marvelous quality of Bolivian coca as a tonic; for that reason the native people have used coca since time immemorial as a fundamental part of their daily nutritional regime. If we were to compare the daily lives of the poor and wealthy classes of society," he added, "we would see that the latter do not live as long nor have as good health as the former. The Indian is strong, healthy, and lives a long life even though he knows little about proper hygiene and medicine and eats few grains….Coca preserves his health, neutralizes the effect of poor nutrition, and increases his energy which is otherwise at the mercy of hard work" (p. 104).

Fernandez's pamphlet repeated arguments made, in the Western context at least, since the sixteenth century about coca's virtually miraculous qualities. "Our sincere and humane desire is to spread the consumption of coca among all the social classes of Bolivia and abroad so that they may equally enjoy its benefits–especially the working classes, the poor, and the needy, the military in war or in peace, and to those people not in the medical profession who cannot buy drugs cheaply to treat their ailments" (p. 100). Not all Bolivians accepted the self-interested reasoning of the Yungas growers. In 1942, Julio Cesar Perez argued for crop substitution and leaving coca behind in the name of progress. "Bolivia," he asserted, "as a country that is adjusting to modern times in a social sense must halt the dangerous use of coca leaves. By suppressing its [*sic*] consumption, we will become a better, hardworking people who respond well to the demands of the modern age" (p. 109).

By the early 1950s, following a U.N. study of coca that considered its chewing habitual rather than addictive, three Peruvian intellectuals continued the coca debate on the pages of *America Indigena*, the journal of the Inter-American Indigenous Institute headquartered

in Mexico. As reproduced in *Drugs in the Western Hemisphere* (pp. 140-154), their arguments for and against coca produced fascinating discussions about the properties of the coca leaf, the place of indigenous peoples within the nation-state, and the character of "modernity" in general. A half century later, these discussions still persist as the twentieth century gives way to the twenty-first. (See Andrew Weil, "The New Politics of Coca," *The New Yorker* [May 15, 1995], pp. 70-80.) Today's arguments, however, as Walker makes strikingly clear, are obliged to take place within the context of a widespread and destructive "hemispheric war against drugs."

Walker devotes Section VI to an evaluation of that war. "By the mid-1980s," he notes, "almost all of the more than twenty American states had defined drugs as a threat to their national security. If the Reagan administration had set out to convince other governments to take drugs seriously, it succeeded beyond all of its expectations. Nevertheless, a problem commonly experienced was not the same as a problem resolved..." (p. 195). A Senate Foreign Relations Committee report from 1988 illustrates the shift from Cold War to drug war security frameworks that took place. Its concluding segment quoted General Paul C. Gorman, former head of the U.S. Southern Command, to the effect that: "The American people must understand much better than they ever have in the past how (our) safety and that of our children is threatened by Latin drug conspiracies (which are) dramatically more successful at subversion in the United States than any that are centered in Moscow" (p. 198).

The documentary entries in Section VI amply indicate the complexities and problems of security-centered drug enforcement efforts. The rising demand for drugs in Europe and the United States in the last quarter century, the increased power of drug cartels, the odds against successful interdiction of shipments, and globalizing economic trends all rendered military solutions less and less likely to succeed. A 1989 article by Bruce Bagley of the University of Miami argues that the Bush administration's military assistance to Colombia would probably only worsen conditions there. A 1994 article from the *Washington Post* describes the Clinton administration as moving away from "the use of military assets" but still committed to "new efforts at eradication" (p. 216) and unclear about its general policy direction. An excerpt from Robert E. Powis, *The Money Launderers* (Chicago: Probus Publishing, 1992) demonstrates how the cartels have been able to keep ahead of government efforts to track and restrict drug-related financial movements.

The final document in the volume is Walker's 1993 article "The Foreign Narcotics Policy of the United States since 1980: An End to the War on Drugs? ". In it, he discusses matters raised in the Introduction to *Drugs in the Western Hemisphere*, particularly the war on drugs as an expansion of U.S. hegemony in the Western Hemisphere under the Reagan and Bush administrations. Despite such efforts as Operation Blast Furnace in 1986, the 1990 Cartagena Summit, and the Bush administration's Andean Drug Strategy, Walker finds that the attempt "to extirpate the drug problem, and hence drug cultures, from the hemisphere" (p. xxiii) has exceeded the realm of the possible. By the time of the Cartagena Summit, the United States was obliged to recognize publicly the legitimacy of drug demand issues. As the U.S. Congress engaged in budget cutting and as Latin American governments invented more autonomous regional approaches in drug matters, the limits of U.S. hegemony had been reached. The "odyssey of cultures in conflict" would be sure to continue into the next century.

Drugs in the Western Hemisphere is a highly valuable work, full of historical documents and perspectives that are worth reading. Walker ably concludes the volume with an excellent bibliographical essay and a short annotated list of suggested films. Despite its virtues, however, *Drugs in the Western Hemisphere* could use some modifications in future editions that would strengthen its qualities for undergraduate classroom use. In order to provide a better framework for students, Walker's introduction to the volume needs less abstract analysis and more basic chronology of hemispheric drug control history in the twentieth century. Even if only in summary fashion, the introduction should also deal explicitly with the question of what appropriate drug policies should be, a matter that student audiences will inevitably wish to consider.

Furthermore, the concept of "drug cultures" requires reconsideration. As it is employed in *Drugs in the Western Hemisphere*, the term vaguely subsumes too many different social, economic, and political realities. It is simply not useful, either analytically or pedagogically, to lump together all crop growers, laboratory processors, cartel traffickers, inner-city distributors, and narcotics users as "drug culture."

In reviewing any anthology, one is always inclined to urge the inclusion of selections that were left out. Nevertheless, *Drugs in the Western Hemisphere* should fill a chronological hole by including fuller documentation for the Cold War era. Moreover, there is a surprising absence of material about the Latin American cultivators of

narcotic crops and about the urban communities where drug consumption has so heavy an impact. *Drugs in the Western Hemisphere* consists almost exclusively of academic, government, and newspaper sources. It needs to broaden its selections somewhat through recourse to anthropological, human rights, journalistic, or testimonial sources.

Despite these shortcomings, *Drugs in the Western Hemisphere* constitutes an important pioneering effort that successfully shows the importance of drug issues to understanding the history of the Americas in the twentieth century. It deserves a wide readership.

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