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The Price of Empire **by Sheldon Richman**

Empire — sorry, benevolent hegemony — has its price. Terrorism is one. Every empire in history probably had terrorism directed at it, because it's one of the few weapons available to relatively weak nonstate adversaries. Another, less dramatic price is the determination of other countries' rulers to go their separate ways. This can range from major moves to establish spheres of influence to sticking a thumb in the empire's eye.

In the latter category comes word that the likely president of Peru, Ollanta Humala, has promised to end the U.S.-financed program to destroy the coca crop in his country. Coca is used to make cocaine, but also tea and herbal medicines. There's only one proper response to Humala: Good for him!

I can hardly imagine anything more arrogant than for a government to destroy crops in another country because that government doesn't want "its" people to have access to them. Nor can I imagine a program better suited to create hatred for Americans. And we wonder why figures like Hugo Chavez in Venezuela get into power. Are the people in Washington crazy? No, of course not. Somehow this fits their agenda of benevolent hegemony. But it makes farmers in the Andes hate us and creates sympathy for Marxist guerrillas and terrorists. This is how "our" government protects us.

The *Washington Post* says the U.S. government has spent \$5 billion since 2000 on crop eradication. Where are the spending hawks when it comes to such budget items? Not that it's accomplished what America's imperialist drug warriors intend. Destroying crops in one location just prompts farmers to grow somewhere else. According the *Post*, "Despite record eradication hauls in Colombia, coca production has been on the rise in Bolivia for each of the past four years. In Peru, U.S. government analysts detected a 23 percent increase in the traditional cultivation zones between 2004 and 2005; when including data from new zones of cultivation, Peru's annual increase was 38 percent."

Destroying crops hasn't even caused the price of cocaine to rise, which is the supposed theory behind the program. The price is almost at an all-time low. This is a tribute to the resilience of even hampered markets.

The *Post* sees ominous signs for the Bush administration. It says, "But if Humala wins the decisive second-round election, to be held in May or early June, the United States' main ally in its eradication efforts — Colombia — will stand as a virtual island in the Andes, surrounded by countries with governments critical of Washington's policies. If continued breakdowns in cooperation occur in Venezuela, Peru, Bolivia or Ecuador, some U.S. officials say they fear that progress made to fight coca cultivation in Colombia could be undermined as production migrates across its borders."

Why is the U.S. government bent on destroying the coca crops of innocent Andean farmers? The drug warriors will say that the crop eventually ends up on the streets of America in the form of cocaine. People in Latin America can't understand why they are scapegoats for the American demand for drugs. It's a fair question. How would American farmers feel if a foreign government bullied the U.S. government into destroying one of their crops because it could be turned into something the foreign government doesn't want its people to have?

It is not enough that the government officials who would deny Americans some recreational drugs (but not others) destroy the freedom and privacy of Americans. They must also become partners in the oppression of foreign peasants. Is it any wonder that foreigners despise us and that their politicians win popularity by defying Washington? Let's hope Humala keeps his word.

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