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Bush's Opium Boom

by James Bovard

Last year saw what is probably the single biggest one-year increase in opium production in world history. Since the Bush administration toppled the Taliban regime, opium production in Afghanistan has increased from 185 tons in 2001 to 3,700 tons in 2002 — an increase of twentyfold. Afghanistan has historically produced more than two-thirds of the world opium supply and the resurgence of Afghan production is good news for heroin addicts everywhere.

However, this is not the brightest page in the history of the Bush administration's efforts to free America and the world from the scourge of drugs. Considering the importance that Bush places on his drug crusade, and the importance of U.S. policy towards Afghanistan, it is worth retracing the steps of this debacle.

In July 2000, Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Omar announced that he was banning any poppy growing in Afghanistan because it was henceforth considered to be un-Islamic. The Taliban regime had previously profited from a 10 percent tax on the opium (a much lower tax rate than cigarettes face in America).

On April 16, 2001, Secretary of State Colin Powell informed the United Nations,

The United States is prepared to fund a United Nations International Drug Control Program proposal in Afghanistan to assist former poppy cultivators hard hit by the ban. However, we want to ensure that assistance benefits the farmers, not the factions, while it also curbs the Afghan drug trade. I have authorized U.S. participation in a UN-led mission to Afghanistan to assess the potential for assistance and the cooperation of local authorities.

On May 17, 2001, Powell announced a package of \$43 million in humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan. The aid was delivered through UN agencies and non-governmental organizations.

Powell said, “We will continue to look for ways to provide more assistance for Afghans including those farmers who have felt the impact of the ban on poppy cultivation, a decision by the Taliban we welcome.”

The *New York Times* noted on May 24, 2001, that the Taliban achieved the end of opium production “without the usual multimillion-dollar aid packages that finance police raids, aerial surveillance, and crop subsidies for farmers.” Abdul Hamid Akhundzada, the director of the Taliban poppy ban, explained, “We used a soft approach. When there were violations, we plowed the fields. At most, violators spent a few days in jail, until they paid for the plowing.” One farmer explained, “No one dared disobey. If they catch you, they blacken your face and march you through the bazaars with a string of poppies around your neck.”

The Taliban regime was notorious for public executions and inflicting death sentences as casually as other governments write parking tickets. The ban on opium production was enforced by the Department for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. Leonard Rogers, deputy assistant administrator from the Bureau of Humanitarian Affairs at the U.S. Agency for International Development, observed that “apparently there has been sufficient discipline inside Afghanistan ... to be successful in the poppy ban.”

On August 1, 2001, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan announced that Afghanistan had achieved “most impressive” results and “the almost total disappearance of the opium poppy in areas controlled by the Taliban.” Annan declared, “It is therefore incumbent on the international community to respond positively to this progress, or to face an equally rapid increase in production at the end of the year if farmers return to poppy cultivation.”

U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Christina Rocca announced that the United States would donate \$1.5 million to UN efforts to aid former poppy growers and declared, “We welcome the Taliban’s enforcement of the ban and hope it will be sustained.” Afghan farmers had lost more than a billion dollars as a result of the ban, and the planned donation from the U.S. government would not quite make them whole.

The Taliban’s opium ban was hailed as one of the greatest successes in the history of the world war on drugs. Bernard Frahi, director of the UN Drug Control Program, commented, “If this had happened in Colombia, where the U.S. is spending billions of dollars and reducing drug cultivation by maybe 5 percent, this would have gotten the Nobel Prize. But because it’s the Taliban, there’s a different reaction.”

On September 2, 2001, Mullah Omar announced that Afghan farmers would be prohibited from growing poppies for a second straight year, proving that the previous year's ban was not a one-time fluke. (Some American officials believed that the Taliban had banned poppy growing solely in order to boost the value of the surplus opium stocks being held in Afghanistan.)

And then al-Qaeda terrorists struck on September 11. The Taliban had been sheltering al-Qaeda for several years and the U.S. government soon made it clear that the Taliban regime would be held accountable for the actions of its guest, Osama bin Laden.

Ten days after September 11, Pino Arlacchi, executive director of the UN Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention, was still chirping about how the Taliban's ban "will dramatically reduce the movement of heroin from Afghanistan to the West."

Karzai and the drug war

By the end of 2001, the Taliban regime was pretty well shattered, its top officials either captured or on the run, and the United States installed Hamid Karzai as the head of an interim government.

After Karzai announced in early 2002 that poppy growing would continue to be banned, the UN Office of Drug Control and Crime Prevention issued a press release praising him and stressing the need for more foreign aid to help the new Afghan government "establish effective law-enforcement capacities and specifically a drug-control commission in Kabul with drug-control units in key provinces."

In April 2002, the Karzai government offered farmers up to \$600 an acre not to plant opium. Many of the farmers who accepted the government proposal got defrauded. Instead of cash, they were given a government voucher that was often very difficult to redeem. In other cases, farmers acceded to government demands to destroy their crops but were never paid anything, not even a voucher. Some farmers concluded that the government was even more devious than the people who previously bought their opium. One farmer in the southern Helmand province declared, "We will never believe the government again."

The Karzai government also promoted the ban by shooting farmers. Reuters reported that in the spring of 2002 "several dozen opium farmers were killed in a battle with government forces in the southern province of Helmand." The British *Guardian* paper reported that "security forces fired

on a rally of 2,000 farmers that was allegedly turning into a riot. Eight farmers were killed and 16 injured.”

In December 2002, the Karzai government sent agents around to destroy opium fields but they were forced to desist after heavy gunfire from tribesmen in some parts of the country. Tom Brown, an American agricultural expert with the Central Asia Development Group, observed, “The opium buyers are the only people encouraging these farmers to grow anything.” Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN special representative to Afghanistan, noted that, for Afghan farmers, “the poppy offers a return on investment that is 38 times that of wheat.” The Afghan government was grossly incompetent at even attempting to fill the niche that it sought to create by outlawing the drug trade.

The United Nations estimated that opium would generate \$1.2 billion for Afghans in 2002 — more than the total international aid Afghans received the previous year, according to *Asia Times*.

Moreover, the raw comparison of the totals from the opium trade with foreign aid is misleading. The vast majority of the opium money ends up in private pockets, while much of the international aid goes for setting up new government bureaucracies and hiring enforcement agents to take the place of the Taliban.

In October 2002, UN officials warned that it would take a decade to eradicate Afghan opium production. A German diplomat in Kabul observed,

In April, British officials were confident that they could eradicate poppies in only three years, but since then they have changed their philosophy; now they are talking about ten years.

(American citizens may remember similar timetables for the achievement of a “drug-free America” — all of which are now consigned to the political graveyard.)

Is it fair to hold George W. Bush personally responsible for the biggest annual increase in opium output in history? Probably not. Unless one chooses to reason like Bush’s own drug warriors. The TV ad campaign run by Bush’s drug czar continually preaches that anyone who uses drugs is a de facto terrorist financier. If anyone who buys any drug in the United States is automatically liable for any attack by terrorists anywhere, why shouldn’t the president be held responsible for deposing perhaps the most successful drug warriors in modern world history?

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