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Book Review **by Richard M. Ebeling**

Bad Neighbor Policy: Washington's Futile War on Drugs in Latin America by Ten Galen Carpenter (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); 282 pages; \$24.95.

The U.S. government's war on drugs has been going on since 1914, when new federal regulations were imposed making many narcotics illegal. Through most of the 19th century, opium and cocaine were obtainable legally from pharmacies with few legal restrictions. And to the extent that some moderate regulatory rules were imposed, they were promulgated and enforced at the state level.

There was concern that the use of opium or cocaine could be dangerously habit-forming and physically harmful to the user. At the same time, opium was sometimes prescribed for a variety of medical ailments and used for helping small children to sleep. Marijuana was often recommended by physicians to be brewed as a tea to alleviate the discomfort of migraine headaches.

But in the 20th century — a period of growing government paternalism and control over the average person's life — the political authorities in Washington increasingly considered it their duty and responsibility to manage the private affairs of people's lives in the name of their own good and the good of the wider society. This culminated in the declaring of an official war on drugs by the Nixon administration in the early 1970s. Since then, the government's drug war has brought untold damage to thousands of innocent people's lives and spread havoc, destruction, and corruption both within the United States and around the world.

The purpose of Ted Galen Carpenter's book *Bad Neighbor Policy* is to document the harm America's drug war has caused in Latin America. From the start, the war on drugs made parts of Latin America the primary battleground, since over time Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia were seen as

among the leading suppliers of marijuana and the raw materials out of which cocaine and heroin were made.

A three-part strategy

Carpenter explains that the U.S. government has followed a three-part strategy over the decades: interdiction, eradication, and crop substitution. Interdiction attempts to prevent drug shipments from reaching America by stopping them at the country of origin, at the borders of the United States, or somewhere along the route.

No matter how many front-page “victories” of large caches of narcotics U.S. authorities uncover, however, only a small portion of drugs are prevented from arriving in the country. The variety of routes and entry points along the land and sea borders of the United States makes interdiction a fundamentally impossible task.

Eradication has meant burning and spraying fields farmed by thousands of poor peasants whose only livelihood comes from the crops they grow. As Carpenter carefully documents, the eradication effort has been a dismal failure, if success should mean less acreage devoted to the planting and harvesting of the banned crops. Instead, when the illicit outputs of Colombia, Mexico, Peru, and Bolivia are combined, cultivation of coca, cocaine, opium, and marijuana has either remained more or less the same or actually increased since the mid 1980s.

What the eradication campaign has done is destroy many legal crops as part of the “collateral damage” caused by the sprayings from the air. This has left thousands of poverty-stricken farmers in these countries with little food to live on and no surpluses with which to trade for other goods in the marketplace. And it has often driven them into the arms of leftist guerrilla groups fighting against the governments in those Latin American countries.

The third avenue of attack has been a crop-substitution program under which farmers in Latin America are enticed to shift to legal crops with the promise of subsidies and other financial incentives for giving up the growing of the forbidden plants.

The problem is that the profits to be earned from the illegal drug market are so great that even when farmers participate in the farm-substitution program, there is a strong incentive to soon move back into the drug trade. This incentive is especially strong because coca and marijuana are hearty plants that grow in places that other plants cannot, and they generate larger harvests during a given planting season.

As Carpenter observes, “To be blunt, crop substitution strategies have worked no better than other exercises in central economic planning around the world. One would have thought even the most determined officials would finally learn that lesson. Unfortunately, that does not seem to be the case.”

Empire and the drug war

The interdiction and eradication strategies have also dragged the United States into the middle of civil wars in countries such as Colombia and Peru. In Colombia, the two leading leftist guerrilla movements either grow coca and marijuana themselves or have frequently made alliances with the mostly apolitical drug cartels against the government of Colombia and its U.S. advisors and military support forces.

As Carpenter emphasizes, the U.S. government has succeeded in antagonizing and alienating both the governments and the peoples of these Latin American countries with its heavy-handed approach of imposing its will and its policies on various countries in the region.

Any government that does not comply with U.S. demands risks “decertification,” which means that it is no longer considered an active and loyal partner in the American war on drugs. The government in question will experience a suspension of various types of U.S. government aid, revocation of import quota authorizations, imposition of high tariffs, curtailing of air transportation with the United States, and loss of U.S. support of loans from international organizations.

In addition, the U.S. government has insisted that Latin American governments remove members of their own governments whom the U.S. declares to be in bed with the drug dealers. The United States has also demanded extradition for trial in America anyone whom Washington declares to be an enemy in the drug war.

And in places such as Panama, where U.S. forces invaded a foreign country to arrest that nation’s political leader on drug charges, or Mexico, where it has authorized the kidnapping of people suspected of having connections with the drug organizations and their forcible return to the United States, the American government has shown flagrant disregard for the territorial integrity and laws of other nations.

At the same time, when it has served its purposes, that same U.S. government has had no hesitation in climbing into bed with dictators and rogue military forces that brutalize and oppress their own people.

The United States has humiliated, embarrassed, insulted, and harmed both private individuals and foreign governments in an arrogant manner that Washington would never tolerate if some foreign government were to do the same to Americans or the American government.

What can be done?

The ultimate problem behind the war on drugs in Latin America, as Carpenter carefully explains, is the illegality of drugs in the United States. It is the vast black market and high black-market prices within America that serve as the magnet that draws people throughout Latin America into the drug trade.

And just as the drug war has greatly harmed many in Latin America, so has it harmed many within the United States. This harm includes overcrowding prisons with inmates guilty of nothing more than having engaged in peaceful drug-related market transactions.

Moreover, through the use of asset-forfeiture laws, the drug war has also dangerously undermined private-property rights and the legal doctrine of presumption of innocence in a court of law. Asset-forfeiture laws enable law-enforcement agencies to seize the property of people who are merely suspected of some drug-related activity or connections; even those found not guilty find it difficult or impossible to reclaim the property and other assets stolen from them by the federal, state, and local government policing departments and bureaus. On the basis of mere unsubstantiated suspicion of drug dealing, the homes of innocent Americans have been broken into by law-enforcement agencies, and ordinary citizens guilty of no crime have been wounded or even shot dead in the process.

What then is to be done? Carpenter calls for the end of the prohibitionist policy of the United States and many other governments. Make the production, sale, and purchase of these drugs legal, and the black-market profits and monopoly power now connected with the drug business would be gone overnight. "Drug legalization ... would provide important benefits to the United States," he concludes.

It would eliminate a significant portion of the crime and violence that plagues the streets of our major cities. It would halve the clogging of the court system with charges against nonviolent drug

offenders and the clogging of our prisons with such inmates. Most important, abandoning the drug war would stop the alarming erosion of civil liberties.

He points out,

The long-term benefits to Latin American societies from abandoning a prohibitionist strategy also would be substantial.... No longer would Latin American nations suffer the massive distortions to their economies, the political corruption, and the escalating violence that accompany the lucrative black market in drugs.... No longer would Washington engage in the demeaning spectacle of alternately bribing and threatening its neighbors to get them to do the impossible.

But at the present time, such wisdom, reasonableness, and humanity seem to be totally absent from those at the higher levels of political decision-making in Washington, D.C. So the war on drugs will continue, with nothing but disaster following in its wake.

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