Flying Blind in the War on Drugs

Congress prepares to pour billions of dollars into fighting drug dealers, but hardly anything into strategy. "Large amounts of federal money may be wasted," criminologists warn.

Addiction

This is the first article in a series on drug addiction. Next week: the epidemiology of drug abuse.

THE FEDERAL WAR on addictive drugs—now 74 years old—is heating up again this summer. Spurred on by polls showing that voters are frightened and angry about crime, Congress is getting ready to step into battle with a $2.5-billion "omnibus antidrug bill." It will succeed the antidrug bills of 1984 and 1986, which, like members of Congress, run on a 2-year cycle.

Even as the bandwagon starts to roll, however, a few social scientists are troubled by the direction it is taking and by the wobbly steering that guides it. They say that no significant attempt has been made to analyze the government's enforcement record in the past or to gather information that would help guide policy in the future. The emphasis is on action, not analysis. It is time, critics say, to invest in policy research and to target expenditures better.

To this end, six experts in criminology have written to the sponsors of the omnibus antidrug bill in Congress asking them to invest in more thoughtful policy analysis. Led by Norval Morris, professor of law and criminology at the University of Chicago School of Law, they sent a plea on 9 May to Senator Alfonse D'Amato (R–NY) and Representative Charles Rangel (D–NY), prominent backers of the antidrug legislation.

In the letter* they ask that "10% of any federal support for drug treatment, prevention, and law enforcement be earmarked for evaluation and research to be conducted under the auspices of the National Institute of Justice," the research arm of the Justice Department. Quoting from the report of a 1986 workshop on drugs at the National Academy of Sciences, they express a concern that "large amounts of federal money may be wasted on transient intervention programs . . .leaving no legacy in the form of improved policy or increased knowledge."

James K. Stewart, director of the Institute of Justice for the last 5 years, agrees. He finds it "surprising that a massive bill that suggests we should spend billions of dollars on drug abuse. . .sets aside nothing for policy, social science, or economic research." Although drug dependence is a chronic relapsing condition, considered by many a disease, most people see it as a form of crime. And "when it comes to crime," Stewart says, "people believe they know what will work." They do not want to be distracted by new insight.

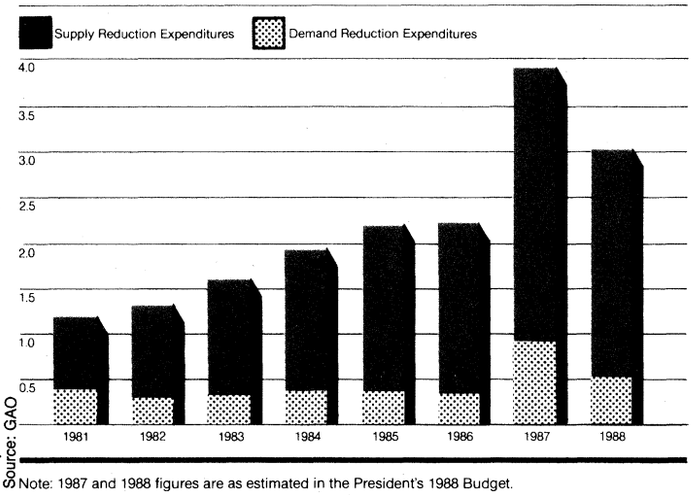
The original goal of the Harrison Narcotic Act in 1914, the first skirmish in the war on drugs, was to eliminate addiction. It ended a booming trade in over-the-counter cocaine and morphine elixirs and brought medical prescriptions under federal control. Eventually it was used to abolish what was called the "medical" solution to the problem—giving "maintenance doses" of morphine to addicts in clinics. Congress added new laws controlling marijuana in the 1930s and, in the 1960s and 1970s, controls on other dangerous drugs. Officials no longer expect enforcement to kill the drug trade, but it is not clear exactly what they expect.

"Historically we've never taken stock of policy relating to drugs," Morris claims. "We've been patching, patching, patching" ever since 1914. He says the nation ploddingly follows the old adage, "If the cure doesn't work, give more of the medicine." The cure in this case is more money for enforcement, with a dollop of "prevention" and "treatment" on the side.

This medicine is getting expensive. According to Charles Bowsher, the Comptroller General and director of the General Accounting Office (GAO), federal antidrug expenditures grew from $129.5 million in 1970 to nearly $4 billion in 1987, then declined with the budget cuts in 1988 to $3 billion. Most of it (around $2.9 billion in 1987) pays for catching and jailing violators of the drug laws. According to the Office of Management and Budget, about $122 million went to basic drug abuse research (and $31 million for AIDS-related studies) in 1987. About $506 million went to "prevention," exemplified by the Administration's "Be Smart! Don't Start! Just say No!" advertising campaign. Another $408 million went to drug treatment programs, almost all of them nonfederal. (States and private insurers carry 84% of this burden.)

Beginning in 1977, the GAO reports, the federal emphasis shifted toward "supply reduction"—arresting smugglers and dealers—as opposed to "demand reduction"—discouraging the use of drugs or treating drug abusers. The trend continues. Bowsher told the Senate Armed Services committee on 8 June that

Federal Drug Control Budget Authority, Fiscal Years 1981-1988 (In Billions of Dollars)



Source: GAO

Note: 1987 and 1988 figures are as estimated in the President's 1988 Budget.

Escalation *of the war on drugs has kept the police busy but has not reduced smuggling. The assault is aimed more at distributors than users.*

*In addition to Morris, they are Alfred Blumstein of the Carnegie-Mellon University; Lloyd Ohlin of Harvard Law School; Albert J. Reiss, Jr., of Yale; Michael Tonry of the Castine Research Corp.; and James Q. Wilson of the University of California at Los Angeles.

expenditures for the war on smugglers increased about 1500% from 1977 to 1987. Actual defense costs in the drug war increased from $5 million in 1982 to $405 million in 1987.

Despite the size of this army in opposition, the illicit drug business keeps growing. A remarkable 60% to 80% of criminal suspects arrested in ten major cities early this year tested positive for drugs. Cocaine and marijuana were the most commonly used, followed by the opiates, phencyclidine (PCP), and amphetamines.

One bit of good news is that the heroin epidemic of the 1960s and 1970s has been frozen in place, with an aging group of addicts estimated to number 500,000. But in the 1980s cocaine swept in, appearing in the smokable and powerfully addictive form known as "crack." The number of regular cocaine users in the United States is said to have stabilized at 5 to 6 million. There are a projected 18 million marijuana users. (These are very weak estimates, as Deborah Barnes reports in an article next week.)

More people are being arrested and convicted for drug offenses than in the past, and they are receiving longer sentences. But they do not necessarily serve the full time because the prisons are full and older convicts must be released to make room for new ones. According to Frank Montasero, former operations chief at the Drug Enforcement Administration, drug traffickers in state prisons in 1984 were serving on average just 39% of the time ordered by courts. Drug treatment centers are also overflowing. Meanwhile, the price of cocaine continues to fall, driven down by a glut of imports. Clearly the present strategy is not a great success.

Congress's response has been to assume that more of the old medicine is needed, as Morris says, and perhaps stronger doses as well. Senator D'Amato, for example, seeks a mandatory death penalty for murder convictions involving drugs. The State Department is under strong pressure to step up crop eradication programs abroad and to penalize foreign leaders who do not cooperate.

On the domestic side, Congress has been lobbying, so far without success, for the empowerment of a "czar" in the Executive branch to whip the several dozen federal agencies in the drug battle into a cohesive army. In vetoing such a proposal in 1982, President Reagan said that he did not want to give birth to "another layer of bureaucracy," with all the confusion and turf battles it would engender. However, Congress ordered the creation of a White House drug board in 1984. The President responded by folding it into a "National Drug Policy Board" in March 1987. The overseers of this legislation in the House judged the panel a "failure" last year because it has no authority to settle turf or budgetary spats and has become just another commander on the battlefield.

For the most part, congressional reviews focus on the need to spend more money. The oversight hearings on the 1986 omnibus antidrug bill (which have just begun) reveal that many congressmen are ready to redouble the funds spent in the war on drugs, knowing little about the results of the last round of spending. Hearings began in the House on 1 to 3 June, chaired by Representative Glenn English (D–OK), head of the Government Operations subcommittee on information, justice, and agriculture. Representative Rangel, chairman of the House Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control, ran a series of hearings earlier that probed the Administration's unsteady support for the war on drugs. (This committee cannot write legislation, however.) The Senate Appropriations treasury subcommittee also began hearings in June, pushing for more funding for the drug war.

Preventive education: *Just say no—or else. . . .*

Agency chiefs report that the money in the old 1986 bill has been obligated and will be spent as Congress wants. But they have little to say about results. It is too early for this, according to spokesmen for the Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration (ADAMHA). In any case, they explain, they will not be able to pass judgment on medical or state-run drug treatment programs, for these fall outside their purview. This will leave the drug war largely unexamined, for most of the 1986 money goes directly to the states. By the time Washington gets around to evaluation, if ever, Morris says, it may be too late to get an accurate picture.

Outside government, some are calling for a more radical attack. The most radical would be to legalize drugs. Editorialists at the *Economist* advocate this method of killing the illicit market, as do a some other journalists and academics. Not many elected officials do. The exceptions are the mayors of Baltimore and Washington, D.C., who declared their sympathy for legalization in May and asked to have the idea discussed in hearings. However, Representative Rangel dismissed it as "nonsense," the kind that belongs only "amid idle chit-chat as cocktail glasses knock together at social events." When this subject came up at a hearing in June, Senator D'Amato threw up his arms and shook his head, voicing scorn for the "half-assed commentators" who favor it.

Many Democrats see legalization this way, too. The House Democratic caucus sent a paper to the party's platform committee on 20 May saying, "Legalization. . .has never worked anywhere. It would send the wrong message to the American public and violate U.S. international treaty obligations. Legalization is surrender." Congress plans no hearings on the subject.

At the opposite extreme there is another radical policy, also poorly analyzed, but one that is highly favored in Congress. This is the plan to push the military into a hot war on smugglers. Amendments to this year's Defense Authorization Bill in both the House and Senate would involve the Pentagon directly in tracking and arresting criminals, a job the generals do not want.

A detailed study paid for by the Defense Department and published by the RAND Corporation suggests that a big investment in this campaign would render a small payoff in terms of cutting drug supplies. Bowsher also warned of a danger to civil liberties if the military gets involved again in conducting surveillance on civilians. But the proponents are determined to go forward, and, as one congressman said at a press conference recently, "heads will roll at the Pentagon" if officials do not get in line. Meanwhile, the advocates have made no rebuttal to the Pentagon's analysis other than to call it defeatist. Nor have they been called upon in hearings to weigh the costs and benefits of

large-scale military involvement. This idea, like legalization, urine testing of workers, mandatory treatment of drug users, and several other new frontiers in the war on drugs, might benefit from a more complete public review.

"There has been a remarkable lack of interest" in improving our understanding of the drug problem, says Peter Reuter, author of the RAND Corporation study. "We have no retail price data on drugs," he says, which would be useful for monitoring the effectiveness of policies. If the cocaine epidemic ever recedes, "You'd like to be able to say, 'It's getting better here faster than there because you're doing something different here.' " The chaos in official records and estimates, he says, makes this kind of analysis impossible, and the lack of information is "an absolute non topic" in Washington. "Nobody gives a damn."

Mark Moore, a federal adviser on drugs of long standing at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, says the current policy amounts to "flying blind in the short run and failing to accumulate the experience that allows us to know what works in the long run."

One reason for indifference, Moore thinks, is that police executives are not trained in scientific methods. They put a "premium on being confident about answers" rather than on raising doubts. As a result, they do not produce useful information about their own operations. Nor do the "clinicians" (the police) mix often with the theorists.

Some blame the researchers, too. The "scientific community has not been enthusiastic" about crime research, according to Stewart of the Institute of Justice. Moore agrees that researchers seem bored by operational problems, the kind that often yield valuable insights. They have imposed very high standards, rejecting data that do not come from random trials. But it is difficult to maintain clinical standards in police stations, courtrooms, and jails. Imperfect data, Moore says, may still have a value.

A bit of solid research would go a long way toward clarifying the nation's goals and alternatives, Moore thinks. He sees an analogy with economics. The President's economic advisers often disagree on theory, and they do not expect to create a perfectly balanced market. But they are skilled at managing the direction of economic change and controlling key variables such as interest and unemployment. That may be good enough.

In the same way, drug abuse could be managed intelligently as a long-term problem. There would be no "winning" the war. But it might be possible to steer events in a favorable direction. "You could have a policy by adaptation and improvisation," Moore says. "And, if you've got a good measurement system, you might not need a theory."

For such a system to work, however, leaders would have to experiment with new ideas, invest in data collection and analysis, and demand objective reviews of experience. Little of this is being done today, and some say this explains the confusion in policy.

As Bowsher of the GAO says: "The dilemma is that no one knows which drug control policies are the most effective. Opinions vary about what the federal government should do. . . Experts disagree about which antidrug programs work the best."

Congress hopes to invigorate the troops this year with new legislation, and there is much on its agenda. However, in the final sprint to the election, the antidrug bill may not get the careful scrutiny it deserves. Many think the result may be a "Christmas tree" loaded with a variety of glittering ornaments, similar to the end-of-term finance bill that passed last December. If that happens, a chance to develop a well-focused drug strategy may be lost.

■ ELIOT MARSHALL

SSC Takes Another Step Forward

The Superconducting Super Collider will receive $100 million in funding in fiscal year 1989—$263 million less than the Administration requested, but enough to keep the research program moving forward. The decisions of the House and Senate Appropriations committees, which each approved $100 million in separate actions, do not assure that the proton-proton particle accelerator will actually be constructed, however.

In fact, both committees express doubts in their appropriations reports about the ultimate fate of the proposed $5.3-billion project, which would have a circumference of 53 miles. Citing budgetary limits across the research sector, the House Appropriations Committee noted that "the new administration may also be similarly constrained on this project in future years."

Besides declining to fund construction of the SSC, the committee scolded DOE for its poor record of bringing large projects online within their advertised budgets, and it urged the department to refine its cost estimates for the collider.

The Senate Appropriations Committee, while supportive of the SSC, expressed concern in its appropriations report about the project's future. "The Committee simply doesn't know where the money is going to come from to undertake this $5-billion to $8-billion project." The Senate committee has agonized over the SSC because of the budgetary impact it may have on other physics programs. It will be non-SSC research, according to the report, that will drive progress in high-energy physics in the next decade.

As a consequence, the committee suggests that "the new administration must either find new sources of revenues to finance new initiatives like the SSC or be more successful . . . in convincing Congress to terminate many current ongoing programs. . . ."

The $100 million provided to the SSC will go to continue research on superconducting magnets, including acquisition of tooling. This budget is $75 million more than the current year's budget and will allow for industry contractors to join in the planning for building the accelerator's 9600 magnets.

Funding for high-energy physics, excluding the SSC, will be at most $568 million—the level recommended by the House. The Senate is recommending $556.8 million. The current year's budget is $539 million, excluding the SSC. The difference will have to be worked out in a House-Senate conference. If the Senate number prevails, it may be difficult to fully operate DOE high-energy physics facilities as called for by the House committee.

On another front, the House-Senate conference must also decide whether to continue forward with engineering studies for Compact Ignition Tokamak (CIT), a magnetic confinement fusion energy experiment designed to ignite a deuterium-tritium plasma for a short period of time. The Senate has appropriated $22 million for the project, while the House has allocated just $15 million. DOE officials say they will have to lay off the CIT design team if the House figure prevails. Research on the new Tokamak would continue. But officials say losing the design team after a year of work would be a major setback.

The House also wants to reduce spending at DOE's Office of Health and Environmental Research to $239 million, down $31 million from this year's level. The Senate favors a budget of $264 million. Despite these differences, both committees urge DOE to take a strong role in the effort to map the human genome.

In its report, the House committee said, "The committee believes that federal research associated with this project should be centrally coordinated by the department." The Senate committee endorsed the House language.

■ MARK CRAWFORD