A War on Drugs with Real Troops?

Congress wants to involve the military in a massive, high-tech assault on the drug trade. Skeptics say it would be extremely expensive and not cost-effective. A Colombian Ho Chi Minh Trail?

This is the third in a series on drug addiction. Next week: the controversy over testing urine for drugs.

FRANK CARLUCCI III, the Secretary of Defense, was being baited on 15 June for refusing to join Congress in a war on drug smugglers, and he did not like it, as anyone could see. Toward the end of a long morning, in a joint hearing run by the House and Senate Armed Services Committees, Representative Jack Davis (R–IL) pulled out a white handkerchief. Carlucci looked stonily across the room and clenched his jaw.

"I brought this along," said Davis, with a flourish, "because it sounds like we're going to surrender." He blasted Carlucci and other Defense officials for being "bureaucratized," rigid, and timid, and exploded in summation: "If I sound angry, it's because I am." Carlucci did not respond.

Davis is one of three angry congressmen—along with Tommy Robinson (D–AR) and the group's leader, Duncan Hunter (R–CA)—who have given the Pentagon a good working over this year. They want the military to take a more aggressive role in spotting and arresting cocaine and marijuana smugglers. The nation is at war over drugs, they say, and, in Davis's words, "When you have a war, who do you call in? . . . You call the military."

Richard Bloom

Frank Carlucci: *"The defense budget is not a slush fund for drug enforcement."*

According to this trio of hardliners, the Pentagon is "the only agency in the U.S. government with the adequate equipment . . . to establish aerial radar coverage across the southern border of the United States. This can be accomplished by maintaining six E2-C or AWACS [airborne warning and control] type aircraft, airborne at 400-mile intervals, from San Diego to Jacksonville."

Hunter says the biggest loophole in U.S. drug enforcement is lax policing of the airways. Smugglers have achieved a "98% success rate" by flying across from Mexico at night in small, slow planes and landing at remote airstrips. The Customs Service and Coast Guard lack the manpower and equipment to track every plane that arrives without a flight plan, and commercial and military radars are not geared to watch this traffic. Hunter wants the military to fill the gap. He would keep one AWACS plane flying in each of six sectors at night and deploy a fleet of 24 tracking planes and 24 helicopters to chase down suspect craft and arrest the pilots. The AWACS radars are more effective and more flexible than the five to eight tethered aerostat (blimp-like) ships Congress has already agreed to provide for surveillance of the southern border.

The House liked Hunter's idea and this spring passed an amendment to the Defense authorization bill directing the Secretary of Defense to "substantially halt the unlawful penetration of United States borders by aircraft and vessels carrying narcotics" within 45 days. The Senate, although less enthusiastic, also adopted an enforcement clause. In the end, Congress softened the language of the law, asking the military to take control of air surveillance for drugs, but not giving them a mandate to arrest criminals or close the border.

The cost of carrying out this mandate is not known. Hunter and company were probably right to dismiss the Pentagon's early estimates as "misinformation." According to a study done for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, a program to seal the borders would cost over $14 billion for airplanes and another $6 billion a year for operations. In addition, officials said, it would require 90 infantry battalions, 50 aerostat surveillance balloons, 1000 fighter planes, 160 cruisers, and much, much more. This was overkill.

But Davis's estimate was equally questionable. He said at one press conference that the job could be done essentially "for nothing" by squeezing it into the military training budget.

One way to get a fix on costs is to consider an earlier budget and multiply. No one agrees on what the multiplication factor should be, but the number of AWACS flying hours would grow by at least five times. According to the General Accounting Office, the Department of Defense spent $389 million on drug enforcement in 1987, or one seven-hundredth of its budget. This category has grown steadily from nothing in 1981, when the military role in the drug war began. In 1989 the figure will leap upward again, and part of the increase will come from money that would otherwise have gone to "pure" military missions. This shifting of priorities, more than the absolute amount, is what Carlucci most resents. At the hearing he said: "The defense budget is not a slush fund for drug enforcement."

Military leaders also worry about blurring the distinction between military and police authority, about their poor chances of stopping smugglers, and the potential for becoming entangled in tedious criminal cases. Admiral Frank Kelso II, commander of the Navy's Atlantic fleet, who flanked Carlucci at the hearing, raised the specter of captains and admirals being recalled from duty to go to court. Others have warned of the damage that could be done to the military's reputation, since success is unlikely, and also of potential injury to the

civil traditions of the United States.

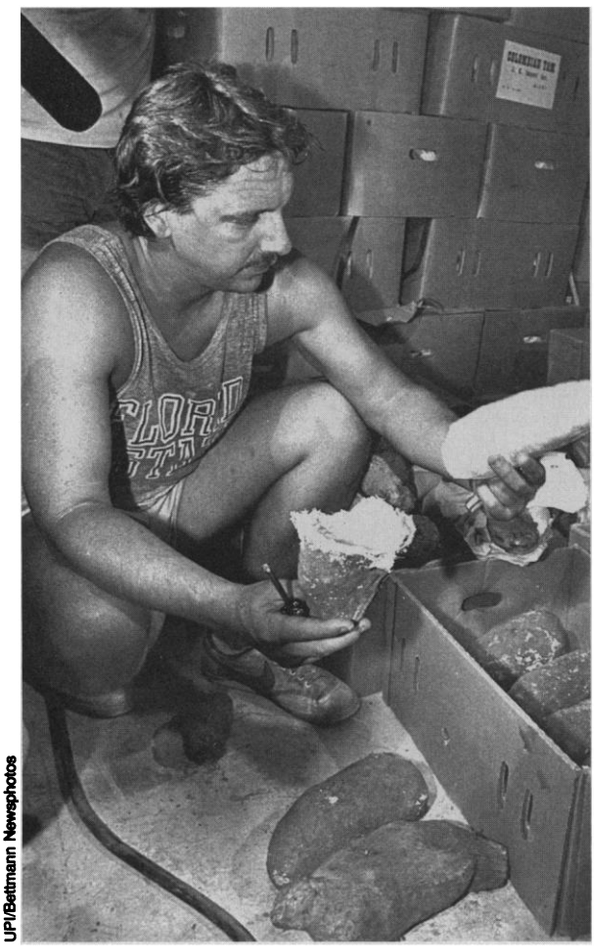
Already, in stepping up the drug war in 1981, Congress modified the Posse Comitatus Act of 1878, which forbids the use of federal troops in civil matters. So far, even with this revision, the military's role has been limited to providing surveillance and transportation. But pressure is growing to throw troops directly into battle.

Given the cost, what is the advantage of using the military to run drug busts rather than following other strategies? The House and Senate devoted little thought to this question before voting for the drug war amendments this year. But the joint Armed Services Committee hearings in June did begin an inquiry—after the "stampede" was over, as Senators John Warner (R–VA) and Edward Kennedy (D–MA) said.

One senator, Carl Levin (D–MI), announced during the hearings that he had made a small study of his own. Levin divided the cost of using Air Force AWACS planes in 1987 by the number of related drug busts. He came up with a price per bust of $350,000 to $450,000. Applying his arithmetic to the Navy, he came up with a price of $2 million per drug seizure and $360,000 per arrest. This seems expensive, Levin said, but he could not find anyone with comparable numbers for the Customs Service or Coast Guard. He suspects they can do the job for less.

The Customs Service did pay for an analysis last year by Wharton Econometrics* to identify cost-effective strategies. Not surprisingly, it found that the kind of work done by Customs agents—seizing bulk quantities of drugs before they enter the United States—is the best way to attack one particular objective it identified. This objective is to remove large quantities of drugs from the supply stream. Customs is at least twice as effective as regular police investigations at doing this. But the Wharton report begs a question: is it efficient to pursue this objective?

The Pentagon also commissioned a study, directed by one Peter Reuter of the RAND Corporation.† It, too, reflects the sponsor's bias but reveals a more sophisticated and broader understanding of the drug trade. For example, it demonstrates that while it is relatively cheap to confiscate drugs in bulk form, as Customs agents do, it is even cheaper for dealers to replace them.



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Cutting into the drug trade. *Seizures are up, but critics argue that more enforcement will do little to dry up the market at the street level.*

Reuter makes a devastating critique of the notion that spending more on interdiction will bring a commensurate decline in imports. The key, he says, is that at least 75% of the money spent to buy cocaine goes to the bottom level of the market, to the street and near-street sellers. Only 10% of the final price goes to the production and smuggling sector. He finds this fact "depressing" because it means that seizures of big shipments have almost no impact on buyers and thus no impact on demand or on the huge profits to be made.

"Almost everything you do" to disrupt the wholesale market is "working on a small part of the total cost." For example, Reuter calculates that the cost to replace all the wholesale cocaine seized by federal agents in 1985 was just 4% of the amount spent on cocaine that year. The assets of the drug marketplace are so vast that the losses caused by interdiction go unnoticed. Dealers have more to spend on transporting shipments than police can spend on stopping them.

Not only are raw materials cheap, but so is labor, even highly skilled labor. At the 15 June hearing, Reuter asked the audience to "Consider the pilot who flies in 250-kilogram shipments [of cocaine] over the Mexican border." He continued: "A fair guess is that he now receives $250,000 for incurring the risks of his business." With more effective interdiction the pilot might triple his fee to $750,000 per flight. "This adds only $2000 to the per-kilogram cost of bringing cocaine into the United States, less than 1% of the retail price." And if pilots were to absolutely refuse the risk, which seems unlikely, sea and land routes are still available. Reuter estimated that ship crews now earn as little as $15,000 to $25,000 a person for smuggling cocaine. There is plenty of room to increase these fees before the cost of ocean transport would become prohibitive.

Using experience as a guide, Reuter and others developed a computer model called SOAR to estimate more exactly how smugglers would adapt if the interdiction rate (the amount seized as a percentage of the amount consumed) were increased. The results are disturbing. In an all-out drug war, assuming the interdiction rate on 10 of 11 routes could be more than doubled (omitting the very hard to control land route), SOAR found that the cost of smuggling would increase 70%, but the retail price would increase only 10%. The impact would hardly be felt by crack buyers. The increase ($2 per purchase) would be less than the variation in the price between New York and Washington, D.C. Under utopian assumptions, Reuter concludes, deploying the military might reduce U.S. consumption from 120 metric tons to 90 metric tons per year.

But, Reuter points out, it is unlikely that seizure rates can be doubled to begin with. Cocaine is produced close to the United States, so that shipments are exposed to surveillance for a short time and smugglers can chose from many modes of transport. It is easy for them to shift methods in response to shifts in enforcement.

Cocaine is also easy to conceal. The entire U.S. market could be supplied for a year by one fully loaded cargo plane. This presents a big "signal-to-noise" problem, in that it takes sharp intelligence to identify the criminal traffic in a sea of ordinary trade. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) offi-

*"Antidrug Law Enforcement Efforts and Their Impact," by Gerald Godshaw, Ross Koppel, and Russell Pancoast (Wharton Econometrics, Bala Cynwyd, PA, August 1987).

†"Sealing the Borders: The Effects of Increased Military Participation in Drug Interdiction," by Peter Reuter, Gordon Crawford, and Jonathan Cave [The RAND Corporation (R-3594-USDP), Santa Monica, CA, January 1988].

cials point out that 20,000 commercial containers enter the United States each day. About 1 million illegal aliens were arrested last year crossing the U.S. border on foot, a subset of the number who tried to get through. Any number could have served as drug carriers.

It is not enough just to have more patrol cars, boats, and planes; the patrol forces must know what to look for. Choosing targets is not simple. Already the guide to suspicious boat profiles is so thick as to be of little use.

The data collected by Reuter show that a skilled player in this game, the Coast Guard, found drugs on only one of every eight boats it boarded in 1986, even when acting on intelligence. It had less success on routine patrols. Therefore, doubling the number of patrols by adding Navy vessels will not double the success rate, unless intelligence is vastly improved. Meanwhile, because of budget cuts, the Coast Guard this year reduced patrols by 55%.

Reuter's well-documented conclusion is that a big increase in the interdiction campaign will bring just a modest reduction, if any, in cocaine imports.

Mark Moore, a senior analyst of drug enforcement who advises the DEA and teaches at Harvard's Kennedy School, also sees interdiction as a tool whose value has been exaggerated, but considers it necessary all the same. "I think it's the weakest instrument we've got in the portfolio," Moore says. He would stress instead what he sees as the weakest part of the adversary's system, the need to rely on contracts that have no legal value.

The main concern of drug dealers, Moore says, is that they will be ripped off. They respond by creating organizations that can enforce contracts with violence and can process money in secret. The biggest payoff for the police, he thinks, would come from attacking the money-handling core of the drug trade, not the transportation system. Over the long term, Moore says, capital is in shorter supply than raw materials or labor.

Recently, as members of Congress have educated themselves again on the complexities of drug enforcement, there has been a scramble to find alternatives to interdiction. There is a new battle cry, heard with increasing frequency—attack demand! By this, legislators mean different things. They would educate children about drugs, invoke harsher penalties for drug users, test workers' urine for drugs, and spend more money on treatment programs. But so far, the debate suggests that most of the new funds for the war on drugs this year will go into the high-cost, low-benefit attack on smugglers and dealers. ■ **ELIOT MARSHALL**

Post Office Nixes Germs by Mail

Neither rain nor sleet nor snow is one thing. Anthrax, Q fever, and plague are another. The Postal Service does not want to deliver disease-causing microorganisms any more. Spurred by apprehension over the Army's growing research program on the implements of biological war, the Postal Service last week proposed a ban prohibiting the mailing of pathogenic organisms.

The ban, however, would prohibit the mailing of all etiological agents, not only those highly infectious microbes of interest to biowarriors. If the proposal is approved, the post office would refuse many common pathogens intensely studied by researchers, including the viruses that cause measles, mumps, herpes, and hepatitis. Mailing enteropathogenic strains of *Escherichia coli* will also be prohibited, as will the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and the cause of the common cold. Commercial carriers will not be adversely affected by the Postal Service ban.

"This is draconian," says Robert Stevenson of the American Type Culture Collection in Rockville, Maryland, perhaps the nation's largest distributor of cell cultures and microorganisms. "Is this going to make etiological agents move more safely through the system? No. What this is going to do is make research ten times more expensive. That's all." The American Type Culture Collections sends about 40,000 shipments a year, of which about 900 include organisms considered extremely hazardous, but these are usually freeze-dried and therefore relatively safe to ship.

Until now, a researcher who wished to send *Yersinia pestis* to a colleague by registered U.S. mail could do so, as long as the investigator placed the bacterial agent responsible for plague in a special canister and affixed a label to the package warning mail handlers that it contained biomedical materials that caused disease.

There are at least 100,000 shipments of etiological agents each year, according to John McVicar, director of the Office of Biosafety at the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta. McVicar does not know how many move through the U.S. mail and how many are shipped with commercial carriers such as Federal Express and United Parcel Service.

CDC is responsible for responding to complaints of damaged shipments. McVicar reports that CDC receives about 50 calls each year, and of these, about three episodes involve leaks of etiological agents. "We have never recorded anyone becoming infected as a result of a leak," says McVicar. "It just doesn't happen. . . . The string of improbabilities is too great."

Yet accidents do happen. The CDC, for one, lost track of a shipment of Crimean-Congo hemorrhagic fever virus it sent to the Army's Fort Detrick facility. Indeed, the package arrived, but it did not contain the hemorrhagic fever agent. CDC went so far as to rifle the dead letter stacks at the post office. In the end, CDC concluded that the shipment had been thrown away and was never mailed to begin with.

According to Robert McKinney, head of the safety division at the National Institutes of Health: "The post office has been transporting biologicals for many, many years. There is absolutely no evidence that anyone has ever been contaminated from handling these materials." McKinney calls the proposed ban "an emotional reaction."

Jeremy Rifkin of the Foundation on Economic Trends is responsible for much of the concern. He first raised the issue in connection with the possibility that the Army planned to increase shipments of highly infectious agents. "A person working in the post office should be provided with the same protections as the technicians dealing with the etiological agent in the lab," says Rifkin.

Ironically, the Army's leading laboratory for biowarfare research at Fort Detrick, Maryland, prefers to use commercial carriers rather than the Postal Service. Last year it mailed 48 shipments of etiological agents to other institutions, according to Thomas Dashiell, director of the Environmental and Life Sciences at the Department of Defense. All traveled by overnight express. Why? "Greater certainty of timely arrival of the specimens rather than any particular safety goal," reports Dashiell.

The ban would not affect shipments of diagnostic specimens such as blood, urine, and tissue. For example, a hospital could still mail blood specimens to a laboratory to test for the presence of HIV. But the lab could not send the positive blood samples back to the hospital, knowing that the samples contained an etiological agent.

■ **WILLIAM BOOTH**