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Cocaine Quagmire:

Implementing The U.S. Anti-Drug Policy in The North Andes – Colombia

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A Book Review Submitted To

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Book Review

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Since the early 1980s, the United States has coercively implemented an anti-drug foreign policy on Colombia with the intent of forcing Colombia to crackdown on producers and narcotraffickers of cocaine so that there would be fewer drugs available that could be shipped to and sold inside the United States. But as author Sewall H. Menzel explains in his intriguing, analytical, and thought provoking study, *Cocaine Quagmire: Implementing The U.S. Anti-Drug Policy in The North Andes-Colombia*, life inside Colombia is more complicated than the straightforward US mission accounts for. For instance, there are contrasting societal values than those of the American policy makers, in addition to different economic and political situations inside Colombia that need to be considered before the successful implementation of any US anti-drug policy in Colombia.

Narcotrafficking inside Colombia was not initially viewed as a threat to the elites who were running the government. It was seen along the same lines as robberies and any other crime that occurs in a society. As a result of their disinterest in what they saw as a petty problem, Colombia's government did not give America's war on drugs the sort of priority that the United States desired it to in order to deal with America's own national security problems, which included an increasing number of Americans who were using cocaine and ending up in hospital emergency rooms. Colombia's elitist government felt that it had more pressing problems to deal with coming from insurgent, armed, and

violent guerilla groups who were challenging the government for control of its territory and for the influence over its citizens.

These guerilla groups began in the 1960s to fight against the social, economic and political injustices of the elitist government that was dominated by two rival political parties who battled for power. Neither of these parties would listen to input from outside groups or would do much to help the poor in the rural outback. As a result of the frustrations endured by the population in the rural outback, stemming from the disparity of wealth that existed between the small elite ruling class and the masses and the inability of the masses to receive an education, which could increase their social status and improve their economic security, the normal societal values of the repressed Colombian society began to wear away, whereby the masses began viewing acts such as threats of violence and corruption as generally acceptable in order to gain power and attain a better standard of living. Still, others who were seeking a more immediate change in their standard of living turned to the narcotrafficking of cocaine and other drugs, like heroine because they could earn huge profits in the international market.

By the late seventies, early eighties, there were three hundred thousand Colombians who had become involved with narcotrafficking. Narcotrafficking involvement grew tremendously because the government had a *laissez-faire* stance. One of the main reasons that the government did not intervene in the drug trade was that the majority of Colombia's elite politicians were being corrupted with bribes from the narcotraffickers. Politicians who raised questions about the lax enforcement of the drug trade or others who refused to accept the bribes were often the targets of assassinations. As author Sewall Menzel explains, "the ruthless application of violence to resolve any and all problems which might otherwise be resolved through astute negotiations became a

key characteristic of the Colombian narcotraffickers' modus operandi" (Menzel 1997: 7). This violence has also extended to judges who tried to convict narcotraffickers.

In exchange for protection from the little governmental authority that did seek to catch narcotraffickers, namely police officers, narcotraffickers paid high extortion taxes to guerilla groups, such as the *Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia*, or FARC. If these protection taxes were not paid, FARC resorted to kidnapping family members of prominent cartel leaders in order to collect ransoms and murdered their captives if the ransom was not paid. Such acts, however, were responded to when the top narcotrafficking kingpins allied themselves to a group that they formed, called *Death To Kidnappers*, or MAS that retaliated viciously against acts of kidnappings. This alliance was highly successful and helped to reduce the amount of kidnappings from FARC and other guerilla groups. It even served to impress the Colombian military in the way that drug traffickers dealt with the guerilla groups, resulting in alliances between the narcotraffickers and the military in the battle to combat the guerillas. This alliance between the military and narcotraffickers resulted in the military receiving bribes from narcotraffickers in exchange for the military's agreement not to pursue them, thus having an effect on official government policy.

Only after the murder of a popular politician in April 1984, Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, the Colombian Minister of Justice, did the Colombian government start to realize the threat presented by narcotraffickers. These narcotraffickers, tried to intimidate the US as well by placing a \$500,000 bounty out for the murder of US Ambassador to Colombia, Lewis Tambs. Unfortunately, for the pursuit of justice, not much could be done to stop these narcotraffickers as they were too well established, with thousands of small, independent trafficking groups in addition to the large cartels. As a result of the existing multiplicity of groups, when some narcotraffickers were busted, there were still others

who were able to meet the demands of an increasing number of consumers in America and in Europe. These crackdowns also had a diminished effect on narcotraffickers because of the great influence that traffickers had in corrupting the government. To escape retaliation from the government when the government felt pressured to retaliate, many cartel kingpins simply shifted their resources to neighboring countries that the US was not as concerned with. This shift of resources between different countries, however, did not stop narcotrafficking. It just made it more expensive for them, which in turn has had the adverse effect of causing them to increase their production to make up the costs.

As professor Menzel notes in his book, despite a stream full of money that the United States has given to the Colombian government to reduce narcotrafficking, through programs such as the *Andean Initiative*, the amount of cocaine and other drugs produced continued to grow because the United States was mainly focusing on the supply side of the equation and not on the demand side, which has steadily continued to increase every year. To get some satisfaction from their otherwise failing foreign policy, the US has tried to get Colombia to extradite some their narcotraffickers who were also Colombian nationals. However, most requests have been turned down by one branch of Colombia's government or another out of fear of losing their sovereignty to US interests. Colombia's refusal to extradite many of its narcotraffickers at the insistence of the US, in addition to weak prison sentences for those who are convicted within Colombia, has led America to believe that Colombia is not committed to winning the war on drugs.

To pressure Colombia to seek a harsher stance towards narcotraffickers, the United States has increased tariffs on Colombian exports and has harassed Colombian officials and residents who have visited the US. But these sanctions have merely served to further undermine Colombia's war on drugs and dealt a losing blow to the United States at the same time. Author Sewall Menzel explains that these retaliatory sanctions

have “jeopardized to a degree [the United States’] own anti-drug policy by increasing unemployment inside Colombia and reducing the export income tax base on which the government relied in part to finance its own anti-drug efforts” (Menzel 1997: 182). Colombian businesses have been forced to close down because they were unable to compete in the US market, where they had to sell their goods at higher prices than other competitors because of a special tariff imposed on their goods. This has resulted in higher unemployment in Colombia, leading many of these people towards entering the narco-trafficking business or joining one of the guerilla groups. In addition, this further reduction of Colombia’s export tax base is especially a harsh blow since Colombia’s economy had already been impacted by the loss of narcodollars, which have been diverted elsewhere since crackdowns on narco-traffickers began.

To a large extent, Colombia continues to need narco-traffickers despite their official stance, because the country, to a large extent, is financed by *narcodollars*. Narco-traffickers have used *narcodollars*, or money earned from narco-trafficking, to create public works projects, including extensive real estate developments, which has created jobs for thousands of Colombians, enabling a growing percentage of Colombians to have a better living standard. Despite Colombia’s best efforts to stamp out narco-trafficking, however, to appease the US and stop violence within the country, cocaine narco-trafficking continues to grow because of an increasing international demand that has not been given adequate attention by the US. Large numbers of Colombians in the US also need to be investigated because there are Colombians inside the US that are connected in the cocaine ring that are responsible for establishing a consumer base inside the country.

But overall, narco-trafficking has continued to be successful in Colombia because Colombia has a society with distorted values, a lower class that continues to lack

opportunities for economic security, and it has corruption at all levels of the government stemming from threats of violence from narcotraffickers for compliance with US anti-drug policy. Professor Sewall Menzel concludes that the US anti-drug policy in Colombia, aimed at reducing the operations of narcotraffickers, has been unsuccessful because the US has taken a one-dimensional approach in dealing with the problem and has not considered the larger societal problems that result in the continuance of narcotrafficking. To this end, Dr. Menzel suggests that the government “ferret out all the potential factors which can negatively effect a policy before it is seriously considered for implementation” (Menzel 1997: 183). In this way, real and obtainable goals can be determined before money is appropriated, therefore, cutting down on wasteful spending. Only in this way can the war on drugs have a chance to succeed.

Dr. Sewall Menzel’s book, *Cocaine Quagmire*, leaves the reader with a great understanding of the complex society in Colombia. With extensive documentation for all of his facts and deriving at logical and thought provoking conclusions, this is a useful study for the novice reader, historian, or any governmental agent who truly seeks to win the war on drugs. In a thoroughly covered manner, Dr. Menzel, a political science professor at Florida International University and Florida Atlantic University, with firsthand expertise in Colombia and the Andean region, has effectively communicated useful ideas for implementing America’s anti-drug foreign policy in Colombia. To ultimately be successful, the US has to look at the Colombian society at large to determine the underlying causes for problems. Also, the most important point to consider if the war on drugs is to be successful is that regardless of the risks, narcotraffickers continue to sell because of an ever-increasing international demand, which has not been adequately considered by the US.