



Central American Drug War

Since Richard Nixon's introduction of a 'war on drugs' in 1971, the Central American drug trade has grown to be defined by seven major countries, from which the whole of the Caribbean and large swathes of the southern United States have become embroiled in a vast, complex, and incredibly profitable system of trade. The US has spent upwards of a \$1 trillion and seen tens, if not hundreds, of thousands killed directly and indirectly as a result of the drug war. More recently, in 2010, the US government spent over \$15 billion dollars in the war on drugs, at a rate of about \$500 per second.

Central American politicians have continued to argue that if the US population did not consume such large quantities of illegal drugs - if there were not so many American drug addicts and users - then Central American and Caribbean countries would not produce large quantities of illegal drugs; namely marijuana, cocaine, and heroin for export, and the region would not be plagued by the powerful and well-financed drug trafficking organizations, often called cartels, that have sprung up throughout the hemisphere over the last 40-50 years. It is accurate to claim that the United States has been for decades, and remains today, the largest single consumer market for illicit drugs on the planet. Although there is no definitive estimate, the value of all illicit drugs sold annually in the United States may reach as high as US \$150 billion. Some \$37 billion per year may be spent on cocaine alone.

Cocaine use is not limited to America alone - Central America itself has been increasingly plagued by the effects of the drug trade. Indeed, Latin American consumers were in 2010 estimated to absorb some 200 metric tons of cocaine. Until 2009, Brazil was considered to be the world's second largest market for cocaine behind only the United States. In the 2011 World Drug Report, the United Nations reports that Brazil has replaced Argentina as the second biggest consumer of cocaine. The report estimates that Brazil has 900,000 cocaine users, which makes it the number one consumer in South America. Cocaine use in Argentina is reported to be 2.6% and 2.4% in Chile. Cocaine consumption rates have increased enormously in other regions of the world, which can again be attributed to the growth of drug trade in Central America. In 2009, Africa had between 940,000 and 4,42 million cocaine users. During the same year, Asia had an estimated 400,000 cocaine users and 2.3 million users. Eastern and South-Eastern Europe had less cocaine users in 2009 (between 310,000 and 660,000). The dramatic rise in both European and South American cocaine consumption specifically have greatly expanded world market demand for cocaine over the past decade. As a consequence, a pronounced trend toward the proliferation



of new global trafficking routes and the increased involvement of criminal trafficking networks originating outside the Andean sub region became increasingly evident.

The United States undeniably has the greatest involvement in the Drug War, having used economic aid and incentives to bolster Central American efforts against drug cartels and general production. In this context, the Colombia Plan (beginning in 2000) and its successor, the Patriot Plan, as well as the Merida Initiative (2006), could be seen as an attempt to protect US interests, rather than drugs-related matters. ‘This process is part of a complex and dangerous dynamic of stabilization-destabilization in which participating Latin American governments play an essential role,’ notes Mariana Ortega Breña.



The War on Drugs is often seen by academics as an pseudo-imperial strategy that revolves around the militarisation and securitisation of Central America, which is seemingly reflected in constant ebb and flow of resources between the US-Central American governments. Under Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, encouraged by the potential threat of communism in Central America, resources assigned to the programmes saw a significant expansion of funds and resources. Since 1999, with the advent of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, and then more independent leaders arising in Honduras, Bolivia, Ecuador, Brazil and Argentina, US hegemony in the region came under significant strain.

The ex-presidents from Brazil, Colombia and Mexico, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, César Gaviria, and Ernesto Zedillo respectively, have stressed the necessity that the United States and Europe should ‘design and implement policies leading to an effective reduction in their levels of drug consumption and, as a consequence, in the overall scope of the narcotics criminal activities’.