

**A Bird's Eye View of Illicit Narcotics**  
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I am between a rock and a hard place: The rock is my appearing before you in lieu of Barry McCaffrey, and the hard place is my near total ignorance of the current state of U.S. narcotics policy and practice. But your President, my West Point classmate and friend, Linc Faurer, averred that I was an acceptable substitute, and when I called my disabilities to his attention, dismissed them. Address any objections to what follows to him.

My intent is to sketch for you some of the history of narcotics as an intelligence issue that will illuminate, I trust, consideration of action on illicit narcotics, now or in the future, by the United States government. I do not know why Barry declined to speak here today, but I can infer that with a major increment of U.S. aid for the government of Colombia wrapped up in the budget tussle, and with a Presidential election year about to start, he was disinclined to talk before this Association. There is a parable in Russian folklore that may be instructive:

It was late October on the banks of the Dnepr River near Smolensk, and the nights were turning cold. The songbirds had flown south; that is, all save one, a bird whose ululations were of extraordinary range and beauty. That bird had remained, basking in human admiration for its concerts, until one early morning, before dawn, frost paralyzed it and it fell unconscious to a country road. Shortly after dawn a farmer with a wagonload of turnips chanced along, spied the bird lying in his path, stopped, and picked it up. The bird was covered with frost, but the peasant detected signs of life, so he made a pile of fresh droppings from his horse, buried the bird therein, and went his way. After a while the heat generated by the manure thawed the bird and it thrust its head out of the manure pile. There before it lay a brilliant autumnal landscape: vast clear skies, and frosted fields sparkling in the sunshine. Inspired by this beauty, and elated at his deliverance, the bird gave voice to a glorious song like no ears ever before had heard. But on that morning there were ears to hear his song, ears belonging to a hungry wolf. Slinking out of a nearby copse, the wolf caught the bird in mid-chorus, and in a single gulp, ate him.

Now the lessons are three: He who put you in it is not necessarily your enemy. He who takes you out of it is not necessarily your friend. And when you are in it up to your neck, don't sing.

Barry could choose not to sing, but Linc gave me no such option.

How should an intelligence officer think about the narcotics problem? Twenty years ago the answer to that question would probably have been "it is not a matter for the intelligence community, but the province of the Drug Enforcement Agency, other law enforcement agencies, and the Surgeon General."

Certainly this former intelligence officer, who served the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and then left Washington in 1983 to become USCINCSO, went south oblivious to the intelligence dimensions of the national narcotics problem. Of course, as a military commander I had for years lived face to face with its various manifestations. In 1952, in Korea as a company officer, I encountered marijuana abuse: American troops harvesting the weed and drying it as garnish on the camouflage nets above front line positions below Hill 1062 in the Kumwha sector. In Vietnam in 1970 the ground in my cantonment in northern I Corps was often littered with the yellow tops from capsules of heroin vended to American soldiers. In Germany in 1978 in V Corps we had vigorous counter-drug programs of education, testing, counseling, and rehabilitation. But in all those instances, despite the fact that narcotics were a distinct threat to military readiness, I never once thought of them as an intelligence matter or consulted an intelligence officer concerning that threat.

But once I was in command in Panama, my concepts were substantially revised. The mission of my command explicitly charged me to promote among the nations of my region peace, democracy, and economic and social well being, and to conduct operations for the purpose, among others, of "countering terrorism, subversion and illegal traffic of arms and drugs." I became aware that the *narcotrafficientes* were a threat to peace, disrupters of democracy and the rule of law, ruinous distorters of any economy, and a prime social evil in the nations in which they operated.

Colombia, even then, was the hemisphere's most violent country. The most common cause of death among males below age thirty was lead poisoning. The drug cartels had openly challenged the legal system, and no judge was safe from intimidation or subornation. A cabinet minister, a promising national leader, was gunned down in the streets of Bogota. The cartels dumped the impure byproducts of cocaine processing on urban youth, vile hallucinogens that caused a wave of suicides among teenagers. And all the while no less than five guerrilla groups waged war in the countryside. The Colombian armed forces proudly declined American military assistance, and scrupulously avoided involvement with the problem of the *narcotrafficientes*, insisting that their mission was the insurgents and defense against Venezuela.

In Peru, Colombian buyers of coca leaf in the Amazon basin caused a gross dislocation of manpower: something like a gold rush caused fathers to abandon their families to trek over the Andes in the expectation of becoming rich cultivating a small patch of coca hacked out of the jungle. Fatherless families flocked to overcrowded urban slums, adding to the deplorable misery of their inhabitants. *El Nino* caused severe floods inflicting yet new woes of trauma and disease on the cities. The magnificent new Soviet aircraft and helicopters of the Peruvian Air Force proved to be largely irrelevant to either problem. The national currency became debased; the American dollar, much overpriced was everywhere sought; domestic capital fled the country. And the Peruvian military, only lately the rulers of the country, were seriously challenged by the Maoist guerrillas known as *Sendero Luminoso*. Senior Peruvian officers openly admitted to me that they maintained a relationship with *narcotrafficientes* for what they termed "intelligence purposes."

In Ecuador, as in Peru, the government had only recently been returned to constitutionality by the military, and as in Peru, the territory beyond the Andes posed major problems of lack of social infrastructure and a boom fed by oil discoveries as well as the lure of Colombian cocaine traffickers.

In Bolivia, the Indian population grew coca and chewed its leaf to cope with altitude — the American Embassy served coca tea to newly arrived visitors to ease their adjustment. Here too, the lure of instant riches drew men away from their homes, and frustrated efforts to establish stable and enduring agricultural or industrial enterprises.

In Central America, from Panama into Mexico, and among the islands of the Caribbean, traffickers sought assiduously to set up safe way stations for moving illicit narcotics into the United States.

Three generalizations about any of these countries were valid: First, the armed forces, usually the army, was the law in the rural areas where insurgency and narco trafficking flourished; often the military was constitutionally charged with the police power outside the cities, and if there was a national police force, it was incapable of countering with either form of lawlessness. Second, the armed forces feared that action against the *narcotraficantes* would expose their officer corps to corruption, and their families to violence. Third, there was broad recourse to violence for political purposes. Every country maintained the fiction of an external threat: Bolivia and Peru armed against Chile; Peru and Ecuador poised forces on opposite sides of a disputed border. Colombia, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala all harbored ancient animosities against neighbors. All these governments were under internal attack from opposition bearing arms. In the case of Guatemala, its irredentist claim on Belize and the operations of the Guatemalan army against Mayan minorities on the border caused the United Kingdom to station in Belize a deterrent force of at least a battalion of infantry, and a detachment of Harrier fighter aircraft and military helicopters.

One can say that, in general, this admixture of criminality, insurgency, and conventional sword rattling posed complex problems for American intelligence. Shortly after I assumed command, there was a terrorist explosion in the center of San Jose, the capital of Costa Rica. The U.S. Country Team there asked USSOUTHCOM for explosive ordnance experts to help the Costa Ricans determine the origins of the incident, which might have been any of several terrorist groups known to have a presence there, or possibly the act of some one or another of the drug trafficking operations known to be underway in the country. It was an instructional experience for me and for my intelligence officers.

It was clear that there was a threat from Nicaragua: the Sandinistas had openly declared their intention of reclaiming the Guanacaste peninsula, on Costa Rica's Pacific coast, had attacked Costa Rican border posts with Hind helicopters and T-55 tanks, and allegedly had numerous agents operating among the quarter of a million Nicaraguan refugees who had sought safe-haven in Costa Rica. Shortly before the bombing incident a Sandinista

leader had boasted in a speech that Nicaraguan forces could occupy San Jose within 24 hours.

Now Costa Rica was a model democracy, entirely worthy of U.S. support. It had been the first foreign nation to declare war on Japan because of Pearl Harbor — a Costa Rican cannon stood outside my quarters in Panama to remind me daily of our long-standing alliance. After World War II, Costa Rica had opened its doors to immigrants, and had a greater percentage of first generation European émigré's than any other country in the region. Over 40,000 American citizens, mostly retirees, lived there. The country had the highest rate of literacy, and the lowest child mortality in the Western Hemisphere. It had replaced its armed forces with a *Guardia Nacional*. Better than any other member of the Organization of American States, Costa Rica had scrupulously observed the forms and substance of constitutional democracy. The U.S. responded with alacrity to the request of the President of Costa Rica for help with the bombing incident.

What USSOUTHCOM found in San Jose was an intelligence black hole. It had become usual for a newly elected President of Costa Rica to set up his own police force to look after the security of his government. But it was also usual to leave any existing police force in place. Our EO experts discovered that the physical evidence from the bomb scene had been removed and distributed among no less than 20 separate agencies, each of which had a different hypothesis about its origins. Our own investigation was therefore, of course, inconclusive, but it was clear that among the many groups who might have perpetrated the crime, the narcotraffickers had a distinct advantage in wealth, mobility, and access to expertise and materiel. Their motive could have been intimidation, in that the Costa Rican government, at U.S. urging, was considering steps to intensify inspections of containers sealed and bonded in Costa Rica, and to exert tighter control over containers undergoing intermodal transfers in Costa Rican ports.

Of course it mattered that it was American concupiscence that underwrote this sort of nefarious activity. USSOUTHCOM had no influence on the demand side of the narcotics issue. But its intelligence officers became engaged in efforts, country by country, to suppress the cultivation of coca, opium poppies, and marijuana, and to prevent processing and export. The *narcotrafficientes* proved to be elusive and resourceful. To help deal with them, I soon concluded, I would have to reorganize SOUTHCOM's intelligence apparatus, and to seek unprecedented cooperation from the U.S. Ambassadors and Country teams supported by the command in the Andean Ridge countries they most directly affected. Let me explain.

USCINCSO then had a small staff — by today's standards, miniscule. As I remember it, I had about 120 officers assigned to my headquarters, half of whom were company grade officers. Most of my intelligence staff was quite junior, and none knew much more about the *narcotrafficientes* than what they had read in open sources. With the support of the JCS and the Defense Intelligence Agency, we set up a low-visibility intelligence cell in the basement of the Pentagon — manned partially by reservists. Further USSOUTHCOM attached young intelligence officers from Panama to agencies in the National Capitol Area where information of the sort I was seeking was produced. By the end of 1984, I

was supported by more than twice the number of intelligence officers in Washington as were stationed in my region, and the quality and quantity of information I was receiving was dramatically improved.

USCINSO was represented on all the country teams of my region by officers charged with military assistance programs, but these often had little or no contact with those on the Ambassador's staff who dealt with intelligence or with law enforcement. Once I was equipped with regional intelligence of significance to the undertakings of a given Ambassador, I was in a position to propose to him a different arrangement. For example, USSOUTHCOM formed what we termed "Tactical Assistance Teams" for attachment to a Country Team, each a small intell-operations group with its own secure communications, that enabled significantly increased situational awareness throughout the region. I believe I am correct when I say that USSOUTHCOM brought about the first widespread use of satellite and computer-based communications in the Andean Ridge. There was some resistance from embassy staffs accustomed to the archaic stovepipes that had served State and other Departments in previous decades, but once Ambassadors saw the intelligence product that our means made available, they cooperated fully.

After I left command in 1985, I prepared an after action review of my theater's intelligence. What I wrote about *narcotrafficientes* is this:

In 1983 I became aware there was overlap, if not congruence, between agricultural, manufacturing, transportation, and communications activities for narcotrafficking, that vast, well-financed criminality which constitutes the primary economic activity in the Caribbean Basin on the one hand, and on the other hand, the locus, movements, and arming of subversive and insurgents. In particular, it is strategically significant that the only governments in Latin America that support narcotics trafficking as a matter of official policy are Cuba and Nicaragua. And tactically, in many ways the problem-set for counterinsurgent warfare and countertrafficking is the same. In 1984 and 1985, with increasing urgency, I advocated combining our theater intelligence with that of the several U.S. agencies which deal with drug enforcement.

Now I am confident that since 1985, the United States has made long strides in improving the performance of its intelligence community. But I note that recent press articles concerning proposed U.S. aid for Colombia depict a concerted effort on the part of senior U.S. officials to regard Colombia's problems with insurgents, especially the ELN and the FARC, as separate and distinct from its struggle against the *narcotrafficientes*.

This leads me to the conclusion that serving and former intelligence officers ought to understand that the crux of the matter is sovereignty: whether a country infested by *narcotrafficientes* shall be able to enforce its laws within its own territory, territorial waters, and contiguous air space. Hence, since air transportation is the sole efficient means of interconnecting the sources of cocaine and cannabis with centers for processing and international distribution, in dealing with *narcotrafficientes*, U.S. assistance ought to focus first on control of national air space. In dealing with insurgents, U.S. assistance

ought to focus on the command and control apparatus of both the guerillas and the government's land forces.

I am sure a number of you have seen the recent article by former Secretary of the Navy John Lehman, who lashed out at — I quote— "the braying political mob of partisan hacks, feminazis, porkers, and contract seekers" —unquote — as well as the President and Republicans in Congress to decry what he termed the "despoliation" of the armed services. He decried excessive use of American troops in peacekeeping, and the debilitating social engineering evident in recruiting, training, and personnel policy. On subject of illicit narcotics, he was characteristically acerbic:

Using the armed forces for drug interdiction is yet another serious mistake. By accepting that new (and I believe unconstitutional) mission, the services have become de facto police. To involve the services in domestic law enforcement is to cross a dangerous line in the separation of powers. Thomas Jefferson would be horrified.

When I was in command, Secretary Lehman was a supporter of SOUTHCOM, and now, as then, I admire his courage and integrity. Let me be clear, therefore that I did not at the time, and do not now, advocate using elements of the U.S. armed forces for drug interdiction in Latin America. I was surely forthright in criticizing the propensity of the Intelligence Community to separate information pertaining to narcotics trafficking from the flow of information about other movements and activities in the foreign countries where my command had American servicemen at risk. Once I was in Miami to testify before a Congressional Committee, and to while away an idle hour, I visited a nearby Coast Guard headquarters, where I saw on a message board a communications from a national agency detailing the itinerary of an aircraft that flew from Colombia to Nicaragua, and thence landed in El Salvador and in northern Guatemala. The times and places were of direct concern to my command, but I confirmed on my return that the information was not passed to us in any form. Up with that, I told the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, I would not put.

Moreover, I learned a very powerful lesson from Jose Napoleon Duarte, then a candidate for the Presidency of El Salvador. He told Jack Vessey and me that "you Americans have been selling us fish. Now you must teach us how to be fishermen." What the Latin nations that we seek to aid require is not for us to do the job for them, or to give them equipment to make them a mirror image of our forces, but to instruct them in ways of solving their problems within their own resources, by methods compatible with international norms on human rights, and with their own laws, traditions and culture.

One of the very first lessons is that it is difficult, if not impossible, to insulate tactically collected information about one form of lawlessness from another form of lawlessness. Attempts to do so are quite dysfunctional. That is as true for governments we support as it is within our own government. It is true that in many Latin nations sharing information among agencies is dangerous, for infiltration by bribe or threat is endemic, and mistrust and disdain is wide spread. For that reason building teamwork among foreign intelligence agencies is often one of the most difficult tasks facing as U.S. country team. Yet in some

countries — as is the case in Colombia today — the very survival of constitutional government may hinge on success with that task.

Judicious use intelligence exchanges is essential. Let me quote again from my after action review:

Intelligence is knowledge, and knowledge is power. Military intelligence can provide knowledge, and knowledge itself can constitute military power. I do not hesitate to say that intelligence was the single most important asset at my disposal in discharging my command responsibilities. Intelligence made me sure in planning operations, and it was useful to Ambassadors, helpful to my superiors, and persuasive with the Congress. Intelligence gave me an advantage in dealing with friends and enemies alike, for knowing that I knew, the one might be embarrassed into acquiescence, and the other deterred.

Now, of course, I had to deal with the question of the Intelligence Community's limited resources. My old colleague, the late Bill Lackman, who then presided over the community budget, was quick to point out that U.S. resources were already over-taxed by the Soviet target. In the short run, we met the resource challenge through three principal means: First, we drew down USSOUTHCOM's force structure, transferring the spaces, and funds thus generated to the intelligence community. Second, we invented the technique of deploying forward only the collection apparatus of U.S. intelligence units, leaving the processing, analysis and dissemination structure in CONUS, but interoperating over satellite communications. Third, we borrowed assets in the force structure for operational support missions and used them in an intelligence role — for example, USAF AC-130 gunships that we used extensively for night surveillance.

In the longer run, we inserted into the DoD budget the resources for the Caribbean Basin Radar System, for a Navy ship configured for theater intelligence support, and for extensive activity by Air Force collectors. We received strong support from Admiral Al Burkhalter and Bill Lackman in setting up plugs into the intelligence community.

Let me illustrate the foregoing with two more anecdotes.

One day I visited Galeta Island, a location in Panama that collected information on the activities of Soviet Yankee submarines in the Atlantic. In my walk through of the site, I encountered a Chief Petty officer who volunteered that he had been born and raised in Colombia, and that in his off-duty hours he had been taping and gisting conversations among Colombianos engaged in narcotrafficking. I sent some of my intelligence officers over to visit the Chief, and their enthusiasm over his sleuthing caused me to send a back-channel to the then DIRNSA commending the Chief's initiative, and suggesting that he capitalize upon it.

In another instance, one of our night-flying aircraft imaged a private aircraft in a remote landing strip we had reason to believe was associated with both drug traffickers and insurgents. The license number clearly visible in the imagery was traced to a serving

high-ranking military officer of the host country. Further collection follow-up enabled the U.S. Ambassador to obtain removal of that individual from office, and to spur action by the host government that shut down an extensive smuggling ring handling the clandestine movement of arms, drugs, and personnel.

Well now, you have been very patient in listening to the ruminations of this ancient soldier. Still there is a certain amount of value in being old, as the KGB discovered in one of its first Cold War operations.

The time was July 1945, the scene Potsdam, during the crucial tripartite meetings in which the post-war world was shaped. Stalin was at table with Truman and Churchill, each with their cabinet officers for foreign affairs. Among the Soviet back-benchers there was an aspirant of the Kommetetya Gosudarstvyenoy Besopastnocte, a chap of short stature and wiry frame, who watched every move of the principals with intense concentration. He may have been the only one who noticed that, at a key juncture in a tense discussion of how post-war boundaries would be drawn in Eastern Europe, Anthony Eden handed Winston Churchill a note that obviously gave the Prime Minister pause, for he broke off talking, looked down, and seemed to ponder before he resumed. Soon, however, he jotted something on a scrap of paper, and passed it to Eden. The latter glanced at the paper, and shoved it aside, but in so doing, caused the paper to flutter to the floor. The KGB aspirant hesitated not, slipped under the table, recovered the paper, and resumed his place without being noticed.

Shortly thereafter, at a recess in the conference, his superior was able to show Stalin and Molotov the captured note, stating that it had been passed just as Stalin's remarks on future Polish borders had elicited a particularly sharp disagreement from Churchill. The note, patently in Churchill's hand, read: "An old bird does not fall out of its nest."

Molotov demanded that the best Soviet experts be put to deciphering the remark, and thereafter the note, together with the Soviet transcript of the proceedings were wired to Moscow. All through the night the Soviet intelligence community labored to make contextual sense of the note. Experts on Polish history and literature and on English literature were called in on the assumption that it was a quote from a heroic leader, or an allusion to a poem, drama or novel. Religious experts were summoned, on the assumption that it was drawn from the scriptures, or the writings of the Fathers of Western Christianity. In the end, as dawn broke in Moscow, the KGB had to admit that it could not interpret its meaning, and wired Molotov accordingly. When Stalin was informed, he shrugged, and said that he would just ask Churchill, and he did that at the first break in the conference that morning.

Churchill's response was brief, and quite direct. It was, he said, a response to a note from Eden informing that his flies were open.

This old bird is through singing.